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IN PICTURES

PHOTO: AFP

Buddhists collect water to pour on a sacred Bodhi tree as they take part in a ceremony at Yangon's Shwedagon Pagoda to mark the full moon of Kason on May 2. The festival commemorates the anniversary of the birth, enlightenment and death of the Gautama Buddha.

Army warns media off Kokang



YE MON **LUN MIN MANG**

THE military yesterday warned media outlets attending ceasefire talks held by

various armed ethnic groups this week that they would be prosecuted if they carried statements by the ethnic Chinese faction fighting government forces in the Kokang region.

The military said in a statement - coincidentally released on World Press Freedom Day - that the Kokang-based Myanmar National Democratic

Alliance Army (MNDA) was an unlawful association. It ordered the media not to broadcast or report any of its statements made during the week-long talks being hosted by the allied United Wa State Army in its stronghold of Pangkham on the border with China.

"If the media broadcast or publish statements of the MNDA, they will

face action under the law," the statement said.

Section 17(1) of the Unlawful Association Act states that anyone who "assists the operations" of a group deemed an unlawful association will face up to three years' imprisonment.

The Kokang region has been under martial law since mid-February, after

the MNDA launched operations on February 9 in an attempt to regain territory it lost to the military in 2009. Both sides are reported to have suffered heavy losses in nearly three months of intense fighting that has displaced tens of thousands of civilians.

CONTINUED ON NEWS 3

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Remfry & Sagar
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Dated: 4th May, 2015

PADANG BESAR, THAILAND

Rescue workers and forensic officials dig out skeletons from shallow graves covered by bamboo at the site of a mass grave at an abandoned jungle camp in Thailand's southern Songkhla province on May 2. Photo: AFP

Thailand vows action after mass grave find

Twenty-six bodies, thought to be of migrants from Myanmar or Bangladesh, recovered from human trafficking camp in the jungle near Thai-Malaysia border

THE remains of 26 migrants thought to be from Myanmar or Bangladesh have been exhumed from a mass grave after Thai police ended their search on May 2, as details emerged of the maltreatment endured at the remote people smugglers' camp.

Thai forensic teams dug out badly decayed skeletons from shallow graves covered by bamboo and a few feet of dirt throughout May 1, according to an AFP reporter at the abandoned jungle camp in Sadao district, in Songkhla province.

“In total we have 26 bodies. As far as I know one is a woman. We still cannot tell the cause of their deaths,” said the head of the forensic team, Police General Jarumporn Suramane.

“There are no more bodies. Every hole has been searched.”

The grim discovery of the site, which is a few hundred metres from the border with Malaysia, on April 30 again laid bare Thailand's central role in a regional human trafficking trade.

Two survivors - men aged 25 and 35 - told doctors they had spent months at the camp despite falling sick and having little to eat.

“Both are malnourished, have scabies and lice,” Dr Kwanwilai Chotpitchayanku said at Padang Besar hospital.

“The older man could not walk - he had to be carried off the mountain. He hadn't eaten anything for two days before he was found. He told the translator he had a fever in the jungle for two months.”

Doctors said the men had not been fully identified but were from either Bangladesh or Myanmar.

Both were rigged to IV drips and appeared frail as they lay in their ward beds.

While the cause of the migrants'

deaths is not yet clear, Thailand's police chief has described the site as a “virtual prison camp”, which was seemingly abandoned just days before its discovery, with the sick men left for dead.

A rescue worker said one unburied corpse indicated the camp had been occupied recently.

‘We will go after the people responsible [for the grave site] no matter how powerful they may be.’

General Aek Angsanant
Thai police deputy commissioner

The border zone with Malaysia is criss-crossed by trafficking trails and is notorious for its network of secret camps where smuggled migrants are held, usually against their will, until relatives pay up hefty ransoms.

Trafficking ‘out of control’
Rights groups say the camp, which is a steep, slippery 40-minute hike from the nearest road, is likely to be just one of dozens in the area as the rewards of trafficking continue to outweigh the risks of being caught.

Tens of thousands of migrants from Myanmar, mainly from the Rohingya Muslim minority but also increasingly from Bangladesh, make the dangerous sea crossing to southern Thailand, a well-worn trafficking route often on the way south to

Malaysia and beyond.

The exodus of Rohingya has followed deadly communal unrest in Rakhine State since 2012.

Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh have also been kidnapped and trafficked to Thailand, after being duped with fake job offers or even drugged.

Thailand says it is cracking down on the trafficking networks on its soil after revelations that government officers, police and navy officials have been involved in the lucrative trade in humans fleeing poverty and persecution.

“We will go after the people responsible [for the grave site] no matter how powerful they may be,” General Aek Angsanant, national police deputy commissioner, told reporters in Padang Besar.

“We care about our image. When people say we're not doing anything about it, it's not true. It's a national agenda.”

In June the United States dumped Thailand to the bottom, or tier 3, of its list of countries accused of failing to tackle modern-day slavery.

Last week UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon described the condition of such camps as “untenable”, adding that their existence should “remain a matter of profound concern for the international community”.

Activists say traffickers are changing their tactics in response to the crackdown and are also holding thousands of migrants at sea for endless weeks awaiting payment before releasing them.

Thailand's human trafficking problem is “out of control”, according to Brad Adams, Asia director of Human Rights Watch. - AFP

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Nation's image harmed by threats to reporters: minister

Minister for Information U Ye Htut and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi speak at World Press Freedom Day event



LUN MIN MANG

lunmin.lm@gmail.com

THE image of the nation was damaged by the death of a reporter killed while covering ethnic conflict last year, Minister for Information U Ye Htut said yesterday on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, while also warning "big media" organisations against abusing editorial freedom.

"Some incidents happened last year relating to the security of reporters. This was a bad development that harmed the nation's image," U Ye Htut said at a media conference in Yangon that was also attended by opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who chairs parliament's Rule of Law Committee.

The minister was referring to the case of journalist Ko Par Gyi, who was arrested by the military in Mon State's Kyaikmayaw township on September 30, 2014, while covering fighting between government troops and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army.

The Tatmadaw said more than three weeks later that he had been

'Some big media organisations are threatening the rights of other media organisations for their political and economic interests.'

U Ye Htut

Minister for information



Minister for Information U Ye Htut speaks at a ceremony to mark World Press Freedom Day yesterday. Photo: Thiri

shot dead as he tried to escape detention on October 4.

"We all need to cooperate to prevent similar incidents happening again in future," said U Ye Htut.

He said such cases, including the arrests of reporters, happened due to the absence of by-laws for media legislation that would protect journalists covering sensitive issues. The rules had been delayed because of what he described as poor cooperation between stakeholders in the media.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said at the ceremony that Myanmar's progress towards democracy had "stalled" and urged the media to

help "restart" the process.

She highlighted two types of censorship in the media - external and self-censorship. Myanmar dropped pre-publication censorship in August 2012.

"Self-censorship is not a good thing. In accordance with the code of ethics of journalism, reporters should not self-censor and be brave enough to point out the wrongdoings in our society," she said. "We do agree that media freedom has increased in recent years. But it is still not perfect," she added.

The UN, which co-hosted the conference with the ministry, called on the government to allow free

reporting in the run-up to elections in November.

"We urge authorities to make special efforts during the election period to ensure that the media community has free and full access, and reports freely without fear and intimidation from anyone," said Sardar Umar Alam, head of the Myanmar office for the UN's culture agency UNESCO.

Reporters without Borders ranked Myanmar 144th out of 180 countries in its 2015 World Press Freedom Index, up 20 places in 10 years. But U Ye Htut said the ministry did not rely on such rankings, which he said focused on freedom of information rather than what he called editorial freedom.

The minister cited media baron Rupert Murdoch as an example of abuse of editorial freedom.

Apparently referring to private media groups in Myanmar, he added, "Some big media organisations are threatening the rights of other media organisations for their political and economic interests. That's a bad sign for the freedom of media in our country."

U Thiha Saw, vice chair of the Myanmar Journalists Association and editorial director of *The Myanmar Times*, said both the government and domestic media needed to raise their game.

"The government needs to change its oppressive manners while domestic media need to develop their capacity of journalism," he said, describing freedom of the media in Myanmar as "not quite satisfactory".

Separately, Amnesty International noted that at least a dozen media workers would spend World Press Freedom Day behind bars in Myanmar as the authorities undermined the "vibrant media scene" that had emerged in recent years.

"The past year in Myanmar has been marked by an increasingly restrictive climate for media, as authorities have resorted to old tactics of harassing and imprisoning journalists," it said in a statement.

Voters go through the motions in Mandalay

MG ZAW

mgzaw.mmtimes@gmail.com

AS voting closed in yesterday's municipal elections, officials manning polling stations said turnout appeared to be about 50 percent, but even those who bothered to vote seemed to do so unenthusiastically.

Not that they had a lot of options. Just 12 candidates were running across four constituencies - Chan Aye Thar San, Chan Mya Tharsi, Pyigyitagun and Amarapura - while voting had been cancelled in two other constituencies due to a lack of candidates.

In Aung Myay Thar San there was not a single eligible candidate, while in Maha Aung Myay just one registered.

"Very few people came and vote - probably half of those on the roll," said an official from a voting station in Chan Aye Thar San. "They weren't really interested in it. They just ticked a box and left."

Results were expected to be released at about 10pm last night, said the head of the electoral commission, U Khin Maung Kyaw.

The vote for representation on Mandalay City Development Committee had attracted little interest in Mandalay since it was announced late last year.

In part, this was due to the one-household-one-vote rule that meant only around 200,000 of the city's 1.2 million residents would be eligible. On top of that, strict eligibility criteria excluded tenants, unregistered households and illegal residents.

However, an additional factor in Mandalay was that the winners will serve only seven-month terms.

"Now it's almost 4pm and barely half of people on the list have voted," said a polling official in Chan Mya Tharsi. "They just don't seem to think the election will make any difference."

Resident U Zaw Zaw said he didn't think the election would matter much.

"How much will the winners really be able to do? They'll be in office just a short time," he said. "MCDC also didn't make the public very aware of the vote - that's another reason for the low public interest."

- Translation by Kyawt Darly Lin

CONTINUED FROM NEWS 1

U Khin Maung Lay, vice president of the Myanmar Press Council (Interim), told *The Myanmar Times* that, in his view, all ethnic armed groups risked being accused of "unlawful association" and that the government should resolve this issue.

"The other ethnic armed groups had contacts with the MNDAA in Pangkham. So, they [could] also have action taken against them under unlawful association. I don't understand why the military released that statement. This can affect the peace process," he said.

He said the military had not stated clearly whether it would take action if the summit of armed ethnic groups included the MNDAA in a joint statement at the end of the conference.

Naing Han Thar, leader of the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team, which represented 16 ethnic groups, including the MNDAA, in nearly 18 months of talks with the government, said the Kokang group should be recognised by the government as an armed ethnic group.

"If the government does not recognise them as ethnic armed groups, battles will continue. And also, the peace process with the term 'nationwide' [ceasefire] will



Ethnic armed group leaders attend a meeting at the headquarters of the United Wa State Army in Pangkham on May 1. Photo: AFP

no longer be valid. The three parties should be welcomed not only to peace talks but to post-ceasefire political dialogue," he said,

referring to the MNDAA and two groups fighting alongside it - the Arakan Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army.

The UWSA, the largest of Myanmar's non-state armed groups, opened its summit of selected ethnic leaders on May 1 to discuss the draft national ceasefire agreement signed by the NCCT with government representatives on March 31.

The UWSA, which is not a member of the NCCT, did not participate in the Yangon talks and has had its

'I don't understand why the military released that statement. This can affect the peace process.'

U Khin Maung Lay

Myanmar Press Council (Interim)

own bilateral ceasefire agreement since 1989. It says it wants a nationwide accord to include the MNDAA, while the government refuses to negotiate with the Kokang group.

Naing Han Thar, who is also secretary general of the New Mon State

Party, said more input on the draft nationwide ceasefire accord would not have a negative impact on the peace process.

Both sides had agreed when signing the draft that it would be submitted to their respective leaders before a final agreement, he noted.

He said that the UWSA and other groups that were not members of the NCCT had expressed views in line with the ethnic negotiating team.

"We all generally agree that political conflicts should not be solved by arms," he said, describing this week's summit as complementing work done on the ceasefire draft and improving the agreement.

President U Thein Sein's government wants a nationwide ceasefire agreement in place well before the run-up to general elections in November. But comments by Naing Han Thar indicated the process could drag on.

He said a meeting of NCCT leaders would be called at a time and venue still to be decided after the Pangkham talks to "edit" and approve the draft ceasefire accord.

UWSA spokesperson U Aung Myint said that today participants in Pangkham were scheduled to discuss position papers presented by the 12 groups on May 2.

MYANMARTIMES

Chief Executive Officer

Tony Child
tonychild.mcm@gmail.com
Editorial Director – U Thiha Saw
editorial.director.mcm@gmail.com
Deputy Chief Operating Officer – Tin Moe Aung
tinmoeaung.mcm@gmail.com

EDITORIAL

Editor MTE – Thomas Kean
tdkean@gmail.com
Editor MTM – Sann Oo
sannoo@gmail.com
Chief of Staff – Zaw Win Than
zawwinthan@gmail.com
Editor Special Publications – Myo Lwin
myolwin286@gmail.com
Editor-at-Large – Douglas Long
dlong125@gmail.com

News Editor MTE – Guy Dinmore
guydinmore@gmail.com
Business Editor MTE – Jeremy Mullins
jeremymullins7@gmail.com
World Editor MTE – Fiona MacGregor,
Kayleigh Long
The Pulse Editor MTE – Charlotte Rose
charlottelola.rose@gmail.com
Sport Editor MTE – Matt Roebuck
matt.d.roebuck@googlemail.com
Special Publications Editor MTE – Wade Guyitt
wadeguyitt@gmail.com
Regional Affairs Correspondent – Roger Mitton
rogermitton@gmail.com
Sub-Editors – Peter Swarbrick, Laignee Barron

Chief Sub Editor MTM – Aye Sapay Phyu
News & Property Editor MTM –
Tin Moe Aung
tinmoeaung.mcm@gmail.com
Timeout Editor MTM – Moh Moh Thaw
mohthaw@gmail.com

MCM BUREAUS

News Editors (Mandalay) –
Khin Su Wai, Phyo Wai Kyaw
Nay Pyi Taw Bureau Chief – Hsu Hlaing Htun
hsuhlainghtun.mcm@gmail.com

DIGITAL/ONLINE

Online Editors – Eli Meixler, Thet Hlaing
elimeixler@gmail.com, thet202@gmail.com

PHOTOGRAPHICS

Director – Kaung Htet
Photographers –
Aung Htay Hlaing, Thiri, Zarni Phyo

PRODUCTION

zarnicj@gmail.com
Art Director – Tin Zaw Htway
Production Manager – Zarni

MCM PRINTING

Printing Director – Han Tun
Factory Administrator – Aung Kyaw Oo (3)
Factory Foreman – Tin Win

SALES & MARKETING

ads.myanmarimes@gmail.com
Deputy National Sales Directors –
Chan Tha Oo, Nay Myo Oo,
Nandar Khine, Nyi Nyi Tun
Classifieds Manager – Khin Mon Mon Yi
classified.mcm@gmail.com

ADMIN, FINANCE & SYSTEMS

Chief Financial Officer – Mon Mon Tha Saing
monmonthasaing@gmail.com
Deputy HR Director – Khine Su Yin
khinesu1988@gmail.com
Director of IT/Systems – Kyaw Zay Yar Lin
kyawzayarin@gmail.com

Publisher – U Thiha (Thiha Saw), 01021
Myanmar Consolidated Media Ltd.

CIRCULATION & DISTRIBUTION

Yangon - subscribe.mt@gmail.com
Mandalay - mdydistribution.mcm@gmail.com
Nay Pyi Taw - nptdistribution.mcm@gmail.com

ADVERTISING & SUBSCRIPTION ENQUIRIES

Telephone: (01) 253 642, 392 928
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Myanmar Consolidated Media Ltd.
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Head Office: 379/383 Bo Aung Kyaw Street,
Kyauktada Township, Yangon, Myanmar.
Telephone: (01) 253 642, 253 651, 392808
Facsimile: (01) 254 158, 392 928

Mandalay Bureau: No. 20, 71st Street,
Between 28th street and 29th Street,
Chan Aye Thar San Township.
Tel: (02) 24450, 24460, 65391. Fax: (02) 74585.
Email: mdybranch@myanmarimes.com.mm

Nay Pyi Taw Bureau: No (15/496) Yaza Htarni
Road, Paung Laung (2)Q, Pinyinmana.
Tel: (067) 25982, 25983, 25309, 21426
Email: capitalbureau@myanmarimes.com.mm

Minimum wage a ballot sticking point for labour protesters

NYAN LYNN AUNG

29.nyanlynnaung@gmail.com

WORKERS petitioning the government for a fixed minimum wage are trying out a new angle: holding votes hostage. If the ruling party wants labourers' backing in the upcoming 2015 general election, they'll have to earn it through effectively shifting the country's wage policy, rights groups warned on May Day.

The labour groups are also threatening country-wide strikes if stultifying wage negotiations don't change course and offer results by the end of the month, they said.

"The government needs to address the vital requirements of its labourers with fixed minimum wages," said U Htey, a member of the Labour Affairs Action Network and one of the May Day demonstrators.

He added that the network and other labour unions will urge members not to vote for the incumbent Union Solidarity and Development Party if it doesn't stand up for the rights and fair pay of workers.

"The elections are very close and we surely cannot vote for a party that has not taken action for us. We demand a commitment to minimum wages and unless we get our demands we will continue demonstrating," U Htey said.

Some 500 workers paraded through Yangon from Bo Sein Hman field to Kyaikkasan sports ground on May 1, international labour day. The protesters' demands included K5600 (US\$5) per day minimum wages, the release of jailed labour and student activists, and better protection of workers' rights.

One of the participating picketers, Ma Khine Wai Tun from the Good Morning Bread Factory, said the employees at the Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zone earn on average K1500 a day, wages that cannot keep up with even basic costs of living.

"We have to pay at least K35,000 for accommodation and also spend K25,000 on meals for the month. These are bare minimum costs. Sometimes we have to spend more for health and other expenses," she told *The Myanmar Times*. "If we do not receive at least K5000 for minimum wages we are not able to cover our liv-



Workers gather with banners for a May Day rally in Yangon to protest for higher wages. Activists around the world mark May Day with marches demanding better working conditions, more jobs and higher rates of pay. Photo: AFP

ing costs properly."

In a May Day address to the nation seemingly aimed at the demonstrating workers, President U Thein Sein promised the government has been working on a sustainable workplace strategy that will benefit both the employers and the workers. He also blamed the workers' protests for slowing down the process, telling the picketers that their actions "hurt"

'The elections are very close and we surely cannot vote for a party that has not taken action.'

U Htey
Labour union member

national output, their families' safety and foreign investment.

Describing opposing pressures at play, the president added that if fixed minimum wages were higher it could be an obstacle for international investment into the country, but when the wages are lower it could damage the economy, leading to labour demonstrations and collapsing factories.

A study earlier this year by risk analysts Verik Maplecroft found that Myanmar's wages are among the lowest in the region and the world, an investment incentive tempered by a reputation for poor working conditions and high levels of child labour.

U Maung Maung, chair of the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar pointed out that 125 years ago labour demonstrators were able to successfully petition for eight-hour work days, but cautioned workers from preemptively protesting to achieve minimum wages.

"The labour demonstrations should

emerge if the government fixes an unfair minimum wage," he said, urging patience until the sum is announced.

But demonstrating workers said they can't afford more waiting when they need the better pay to afford their day-to-day expenses.

"I moved from the delta and I have to rent a bedroom to stay in Yangon. The wages I receive have not enough for me, ever. I also want to receive a fair minimum wage to cover my basic expenditures," said Ko Tun Tun Lwin, a worker from the Sun Pleasure Mattress factory.

He added that he'd settle for K4500 per day, an amount that would just meet his financial needs.

During a May 2 meeting in Mandalay, Minister for Labour U Myin Aye said the government is aiming for a "win-win" wage compromise.

"We have to fix a potential, proper minimum wage that suits the needs of both the employer and the employees," he said.

Myanmar once again among the worst offenders on American religious intolerance watch list

Laignee Barron
laignee@gmail.com

FOR the 16th year in a row, Myanmar is considered among the world's worst persecutors of religious minorities, according to a US government committee.

With four proposed race and religion laws that would restrict "matters of conversions, marriages and births", outbreaks of deadly sectarian violence and a refusal to acknowledge the citizenship of some ethnic minorities, Myanmar is an "egregious" repeat offender, back-peddalling on religious freedoms, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's latest report said.

The annual ranking places Myanmar's religious strife among the likes of North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Eritrea and Iran. Myanmar was one

of 17 countries listed as "of particular concern", where routinely severe violations of religious rights and freedoms are "perpetuated or tolerated".

"Systematic" and "ongoing" intolerance, violence and discrimination resulted in a worse ranking for Myanmar than for Afghanistan.

"Bigotry and chauvinism against religious and ethnic minorities grew more pervasive, in some cases provoked by religious figures within the Buddhist community," said the annual report, which also blamed expanded access to social media for enflaming religious hatred.

In addition to condemning expressions of intolerance toward Muslims and a routine "disenfranchisement" of the Rohingya, the report slams Myanmar for targeting largely Christian areas, such as Kachin and Chin states where cross removal is a

"long-standing practice".

While classifying Myanmar as a country of particular concern results in an ongoing arms embargo, the commission still recommends a policy of engaging with Myanmar government leaders to encourage reconciliation and intervention, a strategy rights observers echoed.

"I am afraid that as long as we continue to let these hate provocateurs get away scot-free we shall continue to see the suffering of the Rohingya and other persecuted peoples, and all these reports won't be worth the cost of the paper in which these are written," said Habib Siddiqui, an activist for displaced Myanmar minorities.

The US report, which was based on a commission visit to the country last August, was released just ahead of US Ambassador for International Religious Freedom David Saperstein's

arrival on May 2.

According to the State Department, Mr Saperstein will spend the three-day trip meeting with religious leaders and government officials and will give an address about the importance of improving religious freedoms. His staff could not be reached for comment yesterday.

During the commission's 2014 trip, however, Nay Pyi Taw made a plea to be removed from the countries of particular concern list. The request was reiterated in February this year along with an accusation that the US was trying to control Myanmar via the ranking.

In a September 2014, Minister for Foreign Affairs U Wunna Maung Lwin told the UN General Assembly that Myanmar has addressed "all major concerns related to human rights" and should be removed from such rankings and rights assessment agendas.

Presidential adviser 'retires' due to links with new party

YE MON

yeemontun2013@gmail.com

A SENIOR adviser to President U Thein Sein has "retired" because of his involvement with another political party, it was announced on April 30. U Nay Zin Latt had served as a political adviser to the president since the presidential advisory board was created in May 2011.

President's Office director U Zaw Htay told *The Myanmar Times* that U Nay Zin Latt's involvement with the newly formed National Party, of which he is a patron, meant he should no longer work with the advisory team. "The only reason for his retirement is that he is working for this political party. The president has no other reason," he said.

The newspaper *7-Day Daily* quoted presidential spokesperson U Ye Htut

as saying the adviser's retirement would not affect the national interest. "A presidential adviser has to be free from bias. His membership of the party could affect his advice to the president," he said.

U Nay Zin Latt did not respond to attempts by *The Myanmar Times* to solicit a comment, but he posted to his Facebook page on April 30, "Retirement is my choice. I'm now free to

fly with the development of the newly born National Party."

The National Party was formed shortly before the Union Election Commission's April 30 deadline for new parties wishing to contest this year's election.

Rumours have spread that the party has been set up by former military personnel, although this has been denied by one of its founders, U Pite Tin.

U Nay Zin Latt told the *Irrawaddy* that the party was founded by graduates of the government-affiliated Myanmar Institute for Strategic and International Studies.

U Aye Thar Aung, central executive committee member of the Rakhine National Party, said yesterday, "We will keep an eye on the National Party, as it contains former members of the military."



A man steers a bullock cart along Ngapali beach in southern Rakhine State. Photo: AFP

Beach hotels ready for 'green' season

EI EI THU

91.eieithu@gmail.com

THE lights are on. The airport is open. The rain is falling. What more would anyone need to persuade them to take off for romantic Ngapali?

Local tourism officials have even changed the name of the weather, omitting those off-putting references to rain. Now, holidaymakers in search of a break are being invited to enjoy the "green season".

If all that is not enough, the beaches are also said to be particularly inviting to writers in general, and writers of romantic fiction in particular – perhaps in hopes of inspiring a local hit *Fifty Shades of Grey Skies*.

U Aung Myo Min Din, chair of the Rakhine Zone Hoteliers' Association, told *The Myanmar Times* yesterday that the reinvigoration of the state-owned domestic airline was behind the decision.

More than half of Ngapali's 23 hotels will stay open during the off-season for the first time, with 198 of 841 rooms available.

"We decided to keep hotels open through the rainy season this year because Myanmar National Airlines will fly daily to Thandwe, and the government has ensured the electricity supply," he said.

He added hopefully, "Ngapali in the rain is particularly conducive to writing. We're planning a special promotion for authors."

But the real beneficiaries may be the local hotel staff, who will now be able to work all year round instead of just the tourist season. "Restaurants

and souvenir and handcraft shops can do business if tourists come to Ngapali," U Aung Myo Min Din said.

Amazing Resort Ngapali is offering a 30 percent promotion for visitors, with room prices ranging from US\$110 to \$350 for foreigners and K148,000 to K500,000 for locals, said Daw Hlaing Hlaing Win, group general manager.

Diamond Ngapali Hotel will also operate for the first time in the rainy season. "We had many inquiries from customers about it last year," said spokesperson Ma Yadanar.

198

Rooms that hotels at Ngapali will collectively open during rainy season, out of a total of 841

Less romantically, there will be no free wifi or satellite TV, and swimming in the sea will be forbidden because of the weather. But, said Ma Yadanar, the hotel will offer weather alerts and extra security patrols, and there's always the pool.

The hotel has opened extra rooms with sea and garden views, and some guests have inquired about long-stay deals, she said.

Bayview Beach Resort will also open about 25 rooms with garden

view for between \$60 and \$100 a night, said manager Daw Kalayar. She added that the hotel was explaining to customers about likely weather conditions at Ngapali beach during the rainy season when they inquired about bookings. "We said the restaurants would not be offering full service and they wouldn't be able to swim in the sea, but it will be very attractive to people who just want peace and quiet," said Daw Kalayar.

In addition to the daily service run by Myanmar National Airlines – formerly known as Myanma Airways – Air KBZ and Mann Yadanapon Airlines will initiate a code-sharing partnership – their first such cooperation – on the Yangon-Thandwe-Sittwe-Yangon route between May and September, Air KBZ chief commercial officer U Myat Thu said.

Under the agreement, Air KBZ will fly three times a week and Mann Yadanapon four times, ensuring a total of two flights a day between Thandwe and Yangon during the low season.

Almost all domestic airlines lose money during the low season because fewer people want to fly, he said. "We don't think many people will go to Ngapali, but there are businesspeople in Sittwe who want to fly," U Myat Thu said.

A one-way trip Yangon to Thandwe in the low season will cost \$66-\$100 for locals and \$83 to \$100 for foreigners, he said.

Ticket prices on Myanmar National Airlines range from \$60 to \$70, with the same price for locals and foreigners.

Bus owners angry over favours for 'special' lines

Older bus lines can charge fixed fares regardless of distance, while new lines are being forced to charge based on the travel distance



AYE
NYEIN
WIN

ayenyeinwin.mcm@gmail.com

THEY were supposed to help relieve some of the misery of getting to and from work. But Yangon's so-called special buses have left passengers in the worst of all commuter worlds: paying "special" fares for what they say is very ordinary service.

Despite complaints from passengers and other owners, things are unlikely to improve, with the Yangon Region Supervisory Committee for Motor Vehicles, better known by its Myanmar-language acronym Ma Hta Tha, saying it has no plans to act, according to its secretary U Ba Myint.

When they were first introduced a few years ago, the special buses promised a seat for every passenger in an air-conditioned environment. In return, passengers would pay a fixed fee, about K200 a trip, irrespective of distance. Freed from the need to hang around at the bus stop waiting for extra passengers to top up the crew's wages, the buses were also expected to move faster and get people to home or office faster.

This is not happening, say disappointed commuters.

U Ba Myint said the rot set in when Yangon Region government agreed to a request from drivers to allow up to five people to stand on special buses, later expanded to 10 passengers.

The regional government reinstated the ban but allowed those buses already permitted to carry standing passengers to continue to do so.

But that's not the only problem. Sometimes the air-conditioning fails, or if the bus is crowded with standing passengers it has little effect in the heat.

"They say these buses are special. I don't see anything special about them. The seats are uncomfortable. The fare is the same whatever the distance. The service from drivers and conductors is poor," said commuter Ko Phyo Maung from North Dagon.

Some say "ordinary" buses are now just as good as the special ones, but charge lower fares – as

little as K50 or K100 for short distances.

Meanwhile, other bus companies are also unhappy at the policy flip-flopping, particularly the regional government's refusal to allow newcomers to charge a fixed fare like the "special" buses, despite their vehicles being far superior.

When vehicle import rules were liberalised from 2011, some bus owners imported foreign-made vehicles to compete against existing lines.

U Myo Win, owner of buses on the No 31 line, said Ma Hta Tha had told the owners they could charge a fixed fare, rather than a fare based on the length of the trip.

"Later we were told we could not so now we're asking for compensation," he said. "We wanted to provide a good service, but for that we had to charge a fixed fare."

'They say these buses are special. I don't see anything special about them.'

Ko Phyo Maung
North Dagon commuter

As *The Myanmar Times* has previously reported, the Forever Green line – a joint venture between a private company and the Road Transport Department launched last year – was forced to lay off 15 conductors last month because it was losing K20,000 a month.

It has attributed this to the government's decision to stop it from charging a flat fare like the special buses, despite it adhering to a one-passenger-per-seat rule. Instead, fares range from K50 to K300 depending on the distance travelled.

"I feel the government is being unfair," said U Hla Win, Forever Green's deputy general manager. "We want to improve Yangon's transport system but the government gives us no support. If we upgrade the buses, we have to raise fares to cover our costs. But the government will not allow us to do it."

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GURGAON
Remfry House
at the Millennium Plaza
Sector-27, Gurgaon-122 009
New Delhi National Capital
Region, India
E-Mail: remfry-sagar@remfry.com
Dated: 4th May, 2015

CHENNAI
376-B (Old No. 202)
Avvai Shanmugam Salai,
Gopalapuram
Chennai - n 600 086, India
Tel & Fax 9-44-4263 7392
E-Mail: remfry-sagar@remfry.com



Photo: Si Thu Lwin

An Indian archaeologist exposes a mural found last month under 5 centimetres of lime on a wall inside Ananda Pagoda.

Centuries-old mural found under lime at Ananda Pagoda

SITHU LWIN
sithulwin.mmmtimes@gmail.com

MURAL art dating to the 17th or 18th century has been found by archaeologists restoring sections of Bagan's famous Ananda Pagoda. The mural was revealed as part of a six-year project being undertaken by the Myanmar and Indian governments to strip off layers of lime applied during disastrous "restoration" projects launched following the 1975 earthquake.

Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library deputy director U Aung Kyaw Win said an Indian archaeologist found the mural by accident last month when they were repairing a damaged section of wall.

Previously covered by 5 centimetres of lime, the mural is located on the outside wall of an inner passage on the southern side of the pagoda.

Now 16 square feet of lime has been removed to enable visitors to see more of the wall art, U Aung Kyaw Win said.

In order to maintain the strength of the wall, not all of it will be uncovered.

He said the time period for the mural made it unique in the pagoda, which was built in 1105 AD, and is one of four surviving temples constructed during the reign of King Kyansittha (1084-1113).

"Most of the murals at the pagoda are from the 12th century. The mural they saw now is from around the 17th or 18th century."

An Indian archaeologist working on the Ananda restoration project said it was the first such mural to be uncovered.

"We found it while we were about to plaster the wall where it had chipped off. They are very interesting. We have removed a 4-by-4-foot section and are now working to carefully expose the mural in detail," he said.

In 2010, the Myanmar and Indian governments signed an agreement to restore Ananda in line with international standards and more

than US\$3 million has been allocated to the project, according to the Indian embassy in Yangon. A team from the Archaeological Survey of India has been working at the site alongside staff from the Ministry of Culture since 2012.

The project aims to restore and preserve the temple's artwork - and undo the damage done by an ill-advised restoration campaign launched several decades ago.

The murals were whitewashed from 1975 as part of a military government-initiated restoration program that has been described by some archaeologists as "catastrophic".

Along with whitewashing, pagodas were renovated with commercial materials and in some cases completely rebuilt, often on top of the original foundations.

The program was partly responsible for Bagan being left off UNESCO's World Heritage List.

- Translation by Thiri Min Htun

No deadlines to appoint new top bureaucrats: govt

SANDAR LWIN



sdlсандар@gmail.com

NO deadline has been set for the appointment of permanent secretaries to 20 additional ministries, according to an official from the President's Office, who said it depended on each ministry's "readiness".

Permanent secretaries - the top civil servant in a ministry - were posted to 11 ministries on April 10. Thirty ministries - all except for the six in the President's Office - are to receive permanent secretaries under the plan, which is designed to improve management of the bureaucracy and strengthen reform efforts.

President's Office director U Zaw Htay said "restructuring" was continuing at the remaining 19 ministries to prepare for the incoming officials.

"The President's Office has instructed all ministries to restructure ... [and] guidelines for the new structure have been laid down. But it can take some time so there is no exact

[completion] date," he said.

Some of the 19 ministries have already completed the process and are waiting for permanent secretaries to be posted, he said, adding that the appointments will "depend on the schedule" of the president.

Potential permanent secretaries received training in Nay Pyi Taw earlier this year, while heads of the five departments in each permanent secretary office were trained in April.

30

Ministries that will receive a permanent secretary. The first 11 were appointed to the new role on April 10

Permanent secretaries take over what was formerly the Union minister's office. In most cases this office has been dramatically expanded - by around four times, to about 160 staff.

The five departments cover policy negotiation, project management and monitoring, ministerial auditing, administration, and information.

The ministries to which secretaries have already been appointed include defence, border affairs, environmental conservation and forestry, health, communications and information technology, sport, and information.

The restructure of the ministries is part of President U Thein Sein's "third wave" of administrative reforms - following political and economic reforms - where a politically independent and permanent civil service is to be established.

The new permanent secretaries are expected to lead the reform process by receiving important tasks from ministers and deputy ministers.

U Myint Htwe, chief of staff to U Tint Swe, the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Information, said the expansion had relieved pressure on staff in the minister's office.

"Before ... we had only about 40 staff and were severely overworked. Most staff had to work up to 7pm or 8pm," he said.

Views

Myanmar's workers of the world

NICHOLAS FARRELLY



nicholas.farrelly@glenlochadvisory.com



A labourer from Myanmar takes a break from sorting fish unloaded from a trawler at a port in Pattani, southern Thailand. Photo: AFP

THE first time I had a long chat with somebody from Myanmar was in Thailand. Many moons ago. They, like millions of their compatriots, had left the “Golden Land” seeking opportunity and safety across the border. I recall our efforts – the suburban Australian kid, the hardened migrant worker – to find common ground. We both talked about dreams, and settled on discussing football.

Since then I have met many other migrant workers, and not just in Thailand. Until recently, the incentives for escaping Myanmar's lacklustre economic conditions and the stagnant politics of misery were immense. It's hard to blame people for taking the chance for greater wealth, health and security in foreign lands.

While such migrants once had limited options, and most simply scurried across the river to Mae Sot, Mae Sai and beyond, a whole universe of possibilities now open up from Yangon's international airport. When you sit to watch the comings and goings, it becomes clear that Myanmar's workers are on the move in unprecedented numbers, travelling far and wide.

They are quickly becoming familiar faces from the posh shopping districts of Kuala Lumpur to the industrial zones of the Middle East. Thousands crew ships that sail to the farthest corners of the world.

Getting to grips with their lives is no simple task. Experiences vary so wildly. The unlucky can be collared at border formalities, or the many checkpoints established across South-east Asia and around the world, for the express purpose of blocking those whose paperwork doesn't add up.

Millions of others, however, manage to get ahead – often with official endorsements, but sometimes through a mix of guile, luck and good timing. They end up surviving, often on the margins, in societies far from their own. Some will harbour ambitions of further movement. Once in Kuala Lumpur, say, it can be exciting

to consider the chance of covering the short distance to Singapore. Pay rates can double or triple for those who end up in the Lion City.

And then there is still the possibility of striking out for more distant shores: the Middle East, Europe, North America, Australia. It all takes planning, judgement and courage, and a hunger for economic betterment.

That large numbers of Myanmar's migrants end up prey for criminals, exploited and discarded, is part of a wider problem. Ethnic minorities, and especially those from groups that don't have full citizenship in Myanmar, are ripe for exploitation. When these stories hit the news there is some level of outrage, leavened by resignation that there are too many ills in the world. Muslims from western Myanmar are among those who seem to do it toughest when they seek out opportunities abroad.

Yet it's not all doom and gloom, and the possibilities for migrants are probably better than ever. Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, to name just the three most obvious countries, all require huge surges of youthful and

energetic labour to take care of the jobs that their own people can't or won't do.

Foreign labour helps to keep goods and services cheap, and also frees up the Thais, Malaysians and Singaporeans to study longer and harder, and work toward achieving solid middle-class status. This means that the jobs lower on the economic pecking order are open to those who want to build new lives in foreign lands.

Later in the year the ASEAN Economic Community will spring to life and, in the long term, the management of intra-regional labour migration will be a big issue. The theory is that everyone benefits when workers can move to places that pay them more for their time and commitment. They can send money home, of course, but also have a chance to build their expertise, create networks and get new things happening. In practice many migrant workers end up stuck: physically and emotionally, struggling simply to survive another day on low pay.

Some suggest that it is only at home that genuine long-term

opportunities can be found. Increasingly in Myanmar I find myself bumping into former migrants.

The taxi driver who spent 10 years machining precision parts in Malaysia, the drunk lads in Hpa-an who crewed cargo ships around the world, the former professor now doing sterling service as a policy entrepreneur: What they have in common is awareness that Myanmar can offer fresh opportunities for those who take a chance at home.

It's not always easy to return, with many former migrants struggling to adjust to the reception they receive back in Myanmar. Former migrant workers may bring capital, skills and languages to the table, but there aren't always the right opportunities for them. They may stumble around in the hope that solid chances will emerge. They may need to cool their heels until Myanmar society catches up to the need for their training and expertise. In the meantime they can wait, think, dream.

Nicholas Farrelly is a partner at Glenloch Advisory and a fellow at the Australian National University, Canberra.

EDITORIAL

Threats to press freedom

YESTERDAY, May 3, was World Press Freedom Day. This year's theme was “Let Journalism Thrive! Towards Better Reporting, Gender Equality & Media Safety in the Digital Age”. With a journalist getting killed almost every week in the world, no theme is more appropriate than one touching on the safety of reporters.

Minister for Information U Ye Htut and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of the Pyithu Hluttaw Rule of Law Committee delivered speeches to mark the event in Yangon.

They both agreed that freedom of the press has not yet been attained in Myanmar, and the industry here is still facing formidable challenges. More legal cases were filed against Myanmar journalists over the past year than any time in recent memory. It is the cases brought by the government that attract the most attention. However, the figures show that while the government initiated two defamation cases against private media outlets, there have been 20 defamation cases filed by media organisations against one another.

Defamation is criminalised in section 500 of the penal code. This is not the only section of the code, or other laws, that pose threats for journalists in Myanmar. There are also the Official Secrets Act and the Unlawful Association Act – both of colonial vintage – and the Electronic Transactions Act, introduced by the military junta. They all have been, and still are, used to imprison journalists.

Legal challenges are not the only hurdles on the path to press freedom. Some are perhaps not immediately obvious. One noted by the minister in his speech was that media owners could use their freedom to intimidate others. Last but not the least, the professional capacity of journalists continues to pose problems.



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Business



People walk past an Ooredoo-branded umbrella. Photo: Aung Htay Hlaing

Ooredoo claims 3.3 million subs

CATHERINE TRAUTWEIN
newsroom@mmtimes.com

THOUGH not quite finished with its first year of operating in Myanmar, Ooredoo can now boast 3.3 million local subscribers.

The firm has spent millions on its ongoing expansion, though is also generating growing revenue, according to its first-quarter 2015 report released yesterday.

Ooredoo Myanmar revenues for the first quarter of 2015 came to QAR 236 million (US\$64.8 million), though

turned an overall \$42 million net loss, attributed to its continued coverage expansion. It now covers more than 28 million people, its report said.

While Ooredoo has 3.3 million subscribers in the country as of the end of March, it claimed 2.2 million subscribers at the end of 2014, and about 1 million subscribers at the end of September 2014, shortly after launching the month before.

First launching in the areas around Yangon, Mandalay and Nay Pyi Taw, the firm has more recently concentrated on expanding into Myanmar's

rural areas. Ooredoo said it activated more than 500 new service sites in the first quarter of 2015, and now serves the country's main cities and half its townships.

The firm also dealt with a major expenditure this quarter as it paid the second part of its licence fee with a price tag of \$252.5 million.

While Ooredoo Myanmar generated less than 3 percent of Ooredoo Group's revenues for the quarter, the company accounts for 15pc of the corporation's capital expenditures, only trailing Iraq and Indonesia.

WASHINGTON

China, India kept on IP rights watch list

THE United States last week kept China and India on its Priority Watch List of trading partners that fail to protect intellectual property rights (IPR), hurting the economy.

In its annual Special 301 Report, the Commerce Department's US Trade Representative said there were now 13 trading partners on its Priority Watch List, three more than its previous report. Ecuador and Ukraine were newcomers, and Kuwait was added late last year. Myanmar is not listed as one of the 72 entities considered by the report.

Ecuador made the Priority Watch List because of its repeal last year of its criminal IPR provisions. "The current lack of criminal procedures and penalties invites transnational organized crime groups that engage in copyright piracy and trademark counterfeiting to view Ecuador as a safe haven," the USTR report said.

Ukraine's government had not resolved problems identified two years ago by the US that include widespread use of illegal software by Ukrainian government agencies and the failure to adopt effective means to combat online copyright infringement, it said.

While welcoming promising efforts by the Ukrainian authorities, the USTR said it was looking forward to seeing "tangible and lasting improvement, both in legislative reform and in practice".

Kuwait was moved to the Priority

Watch List in November after failing "to introduce legislation resulting in a copyright law consistent with international standards, and resume effective enforcement against copyright and trademark infringement".

The other countries on the Priority Watch List were Argentina, Algeria, Chile, Indonesia, Pakistan, Russia, Thailand and Venezuela.

China, the second-largest US trading partner, remained on the list despite certain improvements, including an intellectual property law reform effort, the report said.

There were new and longstanding concerns about IPR protection and enforcement. The report highlighted new measures such as conditioning market access on the use of Chinese-indigenous IPR and the conduct of research and development in China.

"A wide range of US stakeholders in China continues to report serious obstacles to effective protection of IPR in all forms, including patents, copyrights, trademarks, trade secrets, and protection of pharmaceutical test data," it said.

"Given the size of China's consumer marketplace and its global importance as a producer of a broad range of products, China's protection and enforcement of IPR continues to be a focus of US trade policy".

India also remained on the list but the Obama administration was upbeat about future improvements. — AFP

Rapid development of finance sector should be government priority: ADB

CLARE HAMMOND
newsroom@mmtimes.com

THE government urgently needs to prepare a finance sector development strategy focusing on three main objectives – increasing financial sector efficiency, stability and inclusion, according to a recent working paper published by the Asian Development Bank.

These will help Myanmar to overcome a legacy of distrust in cash as a unit of value and banks as a secure place to hold wealth, said Vikram Nehru, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and author of the *Developing Myanmar's Finance Sector to Support, Rapid, Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Growth* report.

The highest priority is to build strong institutional foundations. Specifically, five major improvements are needed, according to Mr Nehru.

Firstly, an automated clearance system should be established. This would allow lenders to spend less time moving large amounts of cash between banks, significantly improving efficiency.

Secondly, an automated payments system ought to be set up, which will need to be fully consistent with the clearance system to ensure that transfers between banks occur immediately after checks clear.

The Central Bank of Myanmar and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) are working on both systems, he said.

Thirdly, a money market system must be created, including the introduction of new short-term Central Bank financial instruments and an auction facility.

"The money market forms the base of the capital market by supporting trading in the most liquid instruments, including overnight loan facilities. To build a money market in

'Finally, after perhaps a decade or two of strong finance sector development, the government could consider liberalising lending rates first.'

Vikram Nehru

Author of report on finance sector

Myanmar, the Central Bank needs to introduce monetary instruments such as treasury bills, that help banks, and eventually non-bank financial institutions, to manage their liquidity," said Mr Nehru in the report.

Myanmar will also need to develop an interbank market and a repurchase agreement (repo) market, to improve counterparty risk.

Furthermore, Central Bank liquidity facilities will need to be developed to support the interbank market, and the Central Bank will also need to apply reserve requirement ratios. These govern the percentage of deposits that commercial banks must set aside as a reserve.

"The primary objective should be to encourage banks to trade money and other liquid financial instruments among themselves, and only when these prove inadequate should banks resort to trading with the Central Bank," said Mr Nehru.

The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are offering technical assistance to the Central Bank of Myanmar in all of these areas.

The fourth development needed, according to Mr Nehru, is a legally protected credit information system, to improve transparency. The fifth is an improvement in financial accounting standards.

"All banks and corporates should

eventually use the Myanmar Financial Records Standard [MFRS] and make public their audited bank balance sheets and income statements," he said.

The report also considers the likely impact of foreign owned banks on Myanmar's financial system. While they are a welcome addition, authorities must be careful that a sudden entry does not exacerbate systemic finance sector risks, according to Mr Nehru.

Authorities could begin by encouraging strategic partnerships and joint ventures, before proceeding to minority foreign shareholdings in domestic banks, he said. Depending on how successful this is, licences could then be issued for majority foreign-owned banks.

"This policy transition could take many years, as it will depend on the development of the institutional and regulatory system, and the speed with which domestic banks acquire adequate financial and competitive strength," said Mr Nehru.

If the government does choose to allow the full foreign ownership of banks immediately, it may need to cap their market share, to prevent their entry from leading to systemic risks, he added.

In addition, Mr Nehru advises caution when liberalising interest rates, particularly without a sound risk management system in place. Only

once the Central Bank's capabilities are well developed should it consider replacing the current fixed rate structure with a floor for lending rates and a ceiling for interest rates.

This will gradually help to introduce competition among banks on the price of capital, he said.

"Finally, after perhaps a decade or two of strong finance sector development, the government could consider liberalising lending rates first and then, later, liberalising deposit rates. This last stage, however, should not be a current concern for policy makers."

Over the longer term, Mr Nehru said he recommends several measures, including restructuring state banks and semi-government financial institutions and either closing, merging or transforming them into one, or at most two, state-owned development banks.

He recommends developing a risk management framework, with a department in the Central Bank formed to identify insolvent banks and assist in winding down their operations, as well as the formation of a deposit insurance system to limit the risk of bank runs.

He also argues for a revamped microfinance strategy and a level playing field, in which laws relating to the finance sector apply equally to state and private banks, thus encouraging more competition.

Malaysia Airlines sidesteps reports it is to downsize fleet

BUSINESS 10

Greek finance minister claims bailout could be avoided with restructure

BUSINESS 11

Exchange Rates (May 3 close)		
Currency	Buying	Selling
Euro	K1175	K1200
Malaysia Ringgit	K305	K320
Singapore Dollar	K807	K830
Thai Baht	K33	K35
US Dollar	K1083	K1092

ConocoPhillips and Statoil sign deal for deepwater block

AUNG SHIN
koshumgtha@gmail.com

NORWAY'S Statoil and US-based ConocoPhillips will invest more than US\$300 million in the exploration and production of offshore oil and gas in Myanmar, according to an official from the Ministry of Energy (MOE).

The two international oil companies signed a Production Sharing Contract (PSC) for deepwater block AD-10, located off Myanmar's Rakhine coast, on April 30 according to the official.

"Statoil and ConocoPhillips have committed to investing \$323.65 million, as well as \$5 million as a signature bonus and \$200,000 as a data fee for AD-10," he said.

The PSC must be signed before exploration and production at the sites can begin.

The two firms will now conduct an environmental impact assessment and a social impact assessment. They will have two years to complete their research and another six years for exploration, said the official.

A total of 19 international oil companies were awarded exploration and production rights to 20 out of 30 oil and gas blocks, in an offshore bidding round in 2013.

Only one PSC now remains to be signed, by ROC Oil Company and Tap Oil, both from Australia, for shallow water block M-7.

Statoil and ConocoPhillips received permission from the Myanmar Investment Commission (MIC) in February for deepwater block AD-10, which has an area of 9000 square kilometers (3474 square miles) in water depths of around 2000 metres (6561 feet).

Each company will hold a 50 percent stake in the block, which

will be operated by Statoil, according to a company press release last year.

"This is a large and virtually unexplored area in a basin with a proven petroleum system and thick sedimentary deposits. With this award, we have accessed at scale in another frontier acreage with significant upside, in line with our exploration strategy," said Erling Vågnes, senior vice president for Statoil, in a press release.

The Norwegian multinational oil and gas company operates upstream activities in more than 30 countries worldwide. ConocoPhillips is the world's largest independent E&P company based on production and proved reserves, according to the company's website.

Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) began signing PSCs with the winning international oil companies in December last year. Since then, including this most recent deal, a total of 19 contracts have been signed by international corporations including Berlanga Holding, BG Group, Canadian Foresight Group, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, Eni, Mercator Petroleum, Oil India, Oilmax Energy, Ophir Energy, PetroVietnam, Reliance Industries, Shell, Statoil, Total, Transcontinental Group and Woodside Energy.

The first offshore round opened in April 2013 and drew a high level of interest, with bids from 75 international oil and gas companies. The winners of 20 out of the 30 offshore blocks were announced in March 2014.

Foreign capital pledged to Myanmar's oil and gas sector is nearly \$17 billion, and \$2.6 billion had already been invested during fiscal year 2015 by the end of January, according to statistics from the Myanmar Investment Commission (MIC).



IN PICTURES

Bunches of bananas are displayed for sale in Yangon's Kyeemyindaing township. Photo: Kaung Htet

UOB receives nod to open Yangon branch



JEREMY MULLINS

jeremymullins7@gmail.com

SINGAPORE-BASED United Overseas Bank Group (UOB) has been granted a licence to begin operating in Myanmar from today, according to the Central Bank of Myanmar.

The bank will be the fourth of nine foreign banks to open their branches, after winning a highly-competitive licensing contest last year.

"The bank has undergone a stringent entry process as defined by the Central Bank of Myanmar in November 2014," the Central Bank said in a press release. It added the bank has met all the necessary requirements before receiving the licence.

Some 25 banks officially signalled their interest in a licence by submitting applications by a July 2014 deadline. A total of nine were declared as winners on October 1, 2014. The nine have a year to meet the licence requirements and open their branches.

While the foreign banks will face a number of restrictions, such as being limited to one branch and being barred from retail banking, their entrance has been criticised by some local bankers, who say they may be too much competition, too soon.

Others say the introduction of foreign banks will help to build the financial sector and improve access to finance for businesses in Myanmar.

UOB said in a press release it aims to offers clients with regional

ambitions a stronger Southeast Asia network with the addition of the Yangon branch on May 4. UOB has had a representative office in Yangon since 1994, though representative offices are restricted from most business.

The branch aims to offer international clients access to onshore and cross-border banking services to help investments and expansions supporting Myanmar's economic growth.

'We have a strong pipeline of foreign direct investment from across our network set to flow.'

Harry Loh
UOB Myanmar country head

"Myanmar, with its huge population and abundant natural resources, is proving to be an attractive destination for our corporate clients from around the world," said Ian Wong, managing director of UOB group strategy and international management, in the release.

UOB Myanmar country manager Harry Loh said the firm has already provided offshore financing and on-the-ground support to regional clients expanding to Myanmar.

"We have a strong pipeline of foreign direct investment from across our network set to flow into Myanmar now that we have received final

approval from the Central Bank of Myanmar to offer onshore banking solutions to foreign enterprises and joint ventures," he said.

Opened	
	The Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ Commenced 22 April
	OCBC Commenced 23 April
	Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation Commenced 23 April
Licensed to open	
	UOB Licenced to commence on May 4
Expected to be licensed by end of September	
	Australia and New Zealand Banking Group (ANZ)
	Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC)
	Mizuho Bank
	Malayan Banking Berhad (Maybank)
	Bangkok Bank

CHDB makes its name among home buyers

TIN YADANAR HTUN
yadanar.mcm@gmail.com

CONSTRUCTION and Housing Development Bank (CHDB) aims for greater visibility among lower-income home buyers, though the bank faces several constraints on lending for home ownership.

The firm attended the Myanmar Largest Real Estate exhibition, held from May 1 to 3 in Yangon's Tatmadaw Hall. While many of the other exhibitors aimed at the upper end of the market, CHDB intends to provide loans for lower-income home buyers.

"Many potential customers don't know about us, so we are getting involved in shows. We intend to help lower-income customers buy their own apartments," a bank spokesperson told *The Myanmar Times*.

State-owned CHDB is limited on the loans it can extend to home buyers, previously stating it needs more funding for more loans. It is

also limited to four-year loans for low-cost housing at present.

The spokesperson said it currently has programs specifically for buyers purchasing units at two government low-cost projects. It offers four-year mortgages at the sites, with the first year at 9 percent and the second through fourth years at 5pc.

CHDB was set up by the Ministry of Construction in 2014 to assist low and middle-income people with owning houses and apartments. Many would-be buyers complain that rapid rises in the property market since 2012 have priced them out of the market.

U Yan Aung, manager of Asia Construction, said that although the market has been cool recently, many buyers are interested in owning their own homes by making use of installment payments.

"Lower-income buyers are interested in CHD Bank to buy lower-cost housing," he said.

TAIPEI

Taiwan still keen on China-backed bank despite rejection

THE head of Taiwan's ruling Kuomintang party said yesterday he was "optimistic" about the island joining a Beijing-led regional development bank, despite China having last month rejected Taiwan's bid to join.

Eric Chu, who arrived in Shanghai on May 2 in the first visit to the mainland by a KMT chief since 2008, made the comments ahead of an expected meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Beijing today.

China last month dashed the island's hopes of becoming a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), but a foreign ministry spokesperson said it could join under an "appropriate name".

"Joining the AIIB is good," Mr Chu told reporters on the sidelines of a cross-strait forum in Shanghai. "I think we are positive and optimistic [about the prospect]."

Asked if Taiwan could join under the name "Chinese Taipei", Mr Chu replied, "That is what we have proposed, our bottom line."

China has considered Taiwan part of its sovereign territory since the KMT fled the mainland in 1949 after defeat at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party.

As a result, China routinely opposes moves by Taiwan to join international organisations, arguing it is not a country.

Mr Chu also urged China to allow

Taiwan to play a greater role in what he called international activities.

"... hope we can let Taiwan be more active in international activities and the international space," he said in a speech at the forum, which was attended by senior Communist Party official Yu Zhengsheng.

Mr Yu said that the forum could "explore the feasibility for a proposal of participation and qualifications" of Taiwan in the AIIB.

Relations between the two sides have warmed after Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT party came to power in 2008.

In 2010, the two sides signed a trade pact known as the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, widely seen as the boldest step yet toward reconciliation.

But the KMT's embrace of China has proved unpopular among some in Taiwan.

In March last year, around 200 students occupied parliament for more than three weeks to demonstrate against a services trade pact, garnering the support of thousands who rallied in what became known as the "Sunflower Movement".

The KMT suffered its worst-ever showing in local polls in November of last year - seen as a barometer for upcoming presidential elections in 2016.

- AFP

TOKYO



Japanese workers are being encouraged to dress casual. Photo: AFP

Japan business dresses down to save on energy

JAPAN launched its annual "Cool Biz" campaign on May 1, an energy conservation drive that calls on business people to ditch their jackets and ties so offices can keep air conditioning to a minimum.

Many workers in Tokyo could be seen dressed down while some government officials took the message to heart by showing up to work in Okinawan-style collared t-shirts.

Temperatures in the capital were hovering in the mid-20s Celsius range, but the mercury can climb

into the high 30s during summer with energy-sapping humidity.

Now in its 11th year, the summer-long campaign asks offices to set their air con at no cooler than 28 degrees Celsius (82 degrees Fahrenheit).

The tradition was embraced by non-Japanese offices too - the British embassy sent out a message to let visitors know they can dress down. "Please feel free to dress in Cool Biz style when you visit the British Embassy Tokyo," it said on Twitter.

The campaign took on a new

significance after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident when Japan scrambled to plug the energy gap left by switching off atomic reactors that once supplied more than a quarter of Japan's power.

Clothing companies have cashed in on the dress-down summer fashion trend, as conservatively dressed corporate soldiers, usually clad in dark suits, turn to spiffy, button-down shirts. But not everyone is happy - tie-makers complain about falling demand for their wares. - AFP

KUALA LUMPUR

Malaysia Airlines mulls its fleet

MALAYSIA Airlines said it was "exploring fleet options" as the flag carrier sidestepped commenting on reports it is planning to sell off some of its planes to restructure after recent disasters and losses.

Aviation website Leeham News and Comment reported on April 30 that the airline was looking at selling or leasing out all of its six Airbus A380 planes.

Flight Global website, citing industry sources, said the beleaguered company was looking at customers for some of its Boeing 777-200ERs and Airbus A330-200 freighters.

Malaysia Airlines said it was still working on its business plan but did not give any details regarding the restructuring reports.

"Malaysia Airlines seeks to clarify the speculation on its fleet. We are currently still working to finalise the business plan ... Exploring fleet options to enhance viability of long haul sectors is one area being looked

into," it tweeted.

The airline, whose already loss-making operations took a further beating after the two tragedies involving the still-missing Flight MH370 and Flight MH17 which crashed in Ukraine, was taken over by state investment fund Khazanah Nasional.

Khazanah Nasional already held around 70 percent of the carrier before it acquired all the remaining shares and took the company private to deal with its problems.

It had said previously that there

'Exploring fleet options ... is one area being looked into.'

Malaysia Airlines

were plans to lay off 6000 employees and reduce the capacity of its fleet size, and that the airline would emerge as a new company by July 1.

The airline's new German CEO Christoph Mueller took over the reins on May 1, local media reported.

Mr Mueller, who was formerly chief of Ireland's Aer Lingus, is the first foreigner to head the national carrier.

Analysts have long blamed poor management, government interference and powerful, reform-resistant employee unions for preventing the airline taking the steps needed to stay competitive.

MH370, carrying 239 people, disappeared in March after inexplicably diverting from its Kuala Lumpur-Beijing course. No trace of the aircraft has been found.

MH17 went down in July in rebellion-torn eastern Ukraine - believed to have been hit by a surface-to-air missile - killing all 298 aboard.

- AFP

SYDNEY

Australia toughens foreign property rules

FOREIGNERS who break rules on buying Australian real estate will face up to three years in jail or fines of A\$127,500 (US\$100,050) for individuals and A\$637,500 for companies under tougher rules unveiled on May 1.

In announcing the changes, conservative Prime Minister Tony Abbott said his government was in favour of foreign investment.

"But it does have to be the right things, and we do need to have a foreign investment review system which encourages public confidence that the foreign investment we need really is in Australia's national interest," Mr Abbott said.

Foreigners are only allowed to buy new dwellings and are barred from purchasing existing residential property in Australia, but the government argues there has been little enforcement of the rules.

Cashed-up foreigners, many from China, have been blamed for driving up prices in Australian property markets, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne, and placing home ownership out of reach of many locals.

Mr Abbott said that under the changes enforcement would be beefed up, while third parties such as real estate agents who knowingly assisted a foreigner to breach the rules would be fined up to \$42,500 for individuals and \$212,500 for companies.

The changes come after the government earlier this year announced it would introduce fees on all foreign investment applications, starting at \$5000 for residential properties valued at \$1 million or less.

Treasurer Joe Hockey said the government was already investigating some 100 cases of illegal purchases, and one divestment order had already

been issued on a property that was now in the process of being sold to an Australian.

In March, Australia ordered China's Evergrande Real Estate Group to sell a Sydney mansion worth A\$39 million that it said was bought illegally under foreign investment rules.

Mr Hockey said foreign investors who have purchased illegally had a moratorium until November 30 to come forward.

"They will be forced to sell their properties but they will not be subject to criminal prosecution by the Commonwealth government," Mr Hockey told a press conference with Mr Abbott in Sydney.

"If you do not come to us we will come to you."

Mr Abbott said the changes were not designed to discourage foreign

'We do need to have a foreign investment review system which encourages public confidence.'

Tony Abbott
Australia prime minister

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The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is looking for three motivated national staff to join our Electoral Support Project team.

The three positions will support and be responsible for various parts of the project which concentrates on three key objectives. The first objective will be to facilitate and provide technical support to election stakeholders to help them liaise and communicate effectively to contribute and create an enabling environment for peaceful and tranquil elections. The second objective will be to support a common understanding of the roles and responsibilities of key actors to avoid disputes and promote a peaceful process. The third will be to support measures that can strengthen integrity of the elections.

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National Officer (Elections Security): http://jobs.undp.org/cj_view_job.cfm?cur_job_id=55943



ATHENS

Greece claims no bailout needed if debt restructured

GREEK Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis insisted on May 2 that Greece would not require a new bailout from its international creditors if they would simply restructure its debt.

Athens last week resumed talks with its creditors in a bid to unblock 7.2 billion euros (US\$8 billion) from its EU-IMF bailout before state coffers run dry.

But analysts believe that even if it manages to secure the last tranche of aid, Athens may have to obtain a new rescue package to stay afloat.

Mr Varoufakis said however that Greece could do without a new bailout.

"One of the conditions for this to happen, though, is an important restructuring of the debt," he told

the *Efimerida ton Sindakton* daily in an interview published on May 2.

The radical-left Syriza government came into power in January on a campaign promise that it would seek to get part of its debt written off.

However, its creditors - the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund - have reiterated that that is impossible.

Mr Varoufakis, whose negotiating style has grated his EU counterparts, also took a swipe at the eurozone in the interview, warning that if it "doesn't change it will die."

He added that "no country, not only Greece, should have joined such a shaky common monetary system."

Tourists admire a statue in Delphi, Greece. Its finance minister insisted no new bailout is required if its debt is restructured. Photo: AFP



Nevertheless, Mr Varoufakis said it was "one thing to say we shouldn't have joined the euro and it is another to say that we have to leave", because backtracking now would lead to "a unforeseen negative situation".

Asked about reported insults from fellow Eurogroup finance ministers during a tense meeting in Riga on April 24, Mr Varoufakis was also dismissive.

Media reports said he had been branded a "gambler", an "amateur" and an "adventurist" by his peers.

"Those would have surely been heavy offences if they had been expressed. But they were not," said Mr Varoufakis.

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras had reshuffled the team handling negotiations with its creditors after

relations between Mr Varoufakis and the EU hit a new low during a stormy Eurogroup meeting in Riga last week.

Athens is struggling to pay salaries and pensions without the promised loans. Almost 1 billion euros in debt and interest is also due for repayment to the IMF by May 12.

Unless an agreement is reached to unlock the remaining EU-IMF bailout money, the debt-ridden country faces default and a possible exit from the euro.

Technical experts from the Eurogroup and the Greek delegation were due to be in contact all weekend, trying to resolve differences concerning sweeping reforms required by Brussels and the IMF to secure the package. - AFP

Putin signs off on BRICS' reserve fund rival to IMF

Russian President Vladimir Putin ratified an accord on May 2 to set up a US\$100 billion reserve fund for the so-called BRICS - the five leading emerging economies that include Russia, China, Brazil, India and South Africa.

Moscow is expected to contribute \$18 billion to the reserve, well behind the \$41 billion China has promised to pour into the fund that was set up after an agreement signed in July 2014 in Brazil.

The emerging economies also plan to form their own international bank based in Shanghai to challenge Western dominance over international money markets.

"The accord on the creation of a common reserve fund for BRICS countries has been ratified," a document from the Kremlin quoted by RIA Novosti news agency said.

The fund is meant to shield the BRICS against "short-term liquidity pressures" and promote greater cooperation between the five member countries.

Russia - which has suffered huge currency fluctuations since the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine - sees the fund as an alternative to international financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank that are dominated by the United States.

- AFP

NEW YORK

Streaming site shuts under pressure

GROOVESHARK, an early leader in music streaming that enraged major labels by letting users upload copyrighted songs, abruptly shut down late last week after years of litigation.

Amid the rapid growth of streaming services such as Spotify that cooperate with the music industry, Grooveshark's website went dark as the company avoided potential penalties in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Grooveshark, which claimed 30 million monthly users, said in a message on the site that it had reached a settlement with the three major record label conglomerates to cease operations immediately and hand over copyrighted song files.

"We started out nearly 10 years ago with the goal of helping fans share and discover music," the message said.

"But despite best of intentions, we made very serious mistakes. We failed to secure licenses from rights holders for the vast amount of music on the service.

"That was wrong. We apologise. Without reservation," it said.

Grooveshark was founded in 2006 by three students at the University of Florida in one of the first sites that, in effect, allowed users to listen to music on-demand for free.

Grooveshark's young, entrepreneurial spirit brought frequent media comparisons to Facebook with one founder who left the company, Colombian-born Andres Barreto, sometimes called the Latin Mark Zuckerberg.

Grooveshark allowed users to upload songs, which were often protected by copyright, to which others could listen.

The site eventually reached agreements with some independent labels but faced a string of lawsuits from the three major conglomerates, Universal, Sony and Warner Music. - AFP

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World

WORLD EDITOR: Fiona MacGregor

ROME

3400 migrants rescued from Med in single day

MORE than 3400 migrants were rescued at sea on May 2, mainly off Libya, as Europe seeks ways to deal with the flood of people trying to reach its shores following a series of deadly shipwrecks.

A total of 3427 people were picked up during the operation coordinated by the Italian coast guard.

While they said it was a "very busy day", it was not a record for the coast guard, which coordinated the rescue of 3791 migrants on April 12 and another 2850 the following day.

French patrol boat Commandant Birot, which was sent to boost EU patrols to deal with the influx of migrant boats in the Mediterranean, picked up 217 people off the coast of Libya.

arrive in Sicily or southern Italy last night.

According to the Italian coast guard, the French patrol vessel should land its migrants at a port in Calabria.

Hundreds of migrants, mostly African but also many Syrians escaping the war at home, land every day on the Italian coast after being rescued by the Italian navy or coast guard.

Following a series of shipwrecks which killed more than 1200 people in April, European leaders at an extraordinary summit on April 23 agreed to strengthen the EU presence at sea in a bid to halt the tidal wave of refugees trying to reach Europe.

They decided to triple funding for the Triton operation, run by the Frontex border agency, which was previously 3 million euros (US\$3.4 million) a month.

Triton was launched in November 2014 to supplant the more ambitious Italian "Mare Nostrum" ("Our Sea") rescue operation launched a year earlier.

The EU is also seeking UN support to combat the smugglers who thrive on the chaotic situation in Libya.

Possible intervention is complicated by the situation in the North African country where two governments and parliaments are vying for power.

Humanitarian organisations argue for a better reception for refugees fleeing war, and stress that even if the international community was able to close the Libyan route, another would open elsewhere.

Europe's only non-governmental rescue vessel set sail on May 2 from Malta on a six-month mission to reduce the number of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean.

The *MV Phoenix*, which last year saved 3000 lives in just two months, will face an even tougher mission this year because of the spike in migrant crossings, said Martin Xuereb, director of the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS).

MOAS has teamed up with Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF or Doctors without Borders) to operate the 40-metre vessel which is equipped with a state-of-the-art drone that will be used to locate migrant vessels.

It is the only private ship engaged in the operation, although the coast guard regularly calls on passing freighters to rescue migrants when no other vessel is close by.

- AFP



Shipwrecked migrants are rescued by the Italian coast guard on May 1, in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Sicily. Photo: AFP

MILLION US\$

3.4

Monthly spend by the EU on the Triton Operation to tackle boat migration

The migrants, all men, had been on board three boats, the authorities said, adding that two suspected people-smugglers were also caught and would be handed over to Italian police.

In Italy, the coast guard announced late at night that 16 vessels had rescued a total of 3427 people on May 2 alone in an operation coordinated from their headquarters in Rome.

In addition to the French patrol boat, the rescue operation mobilised four Italian coast guard ships, two Italian navy vessels, two cargo ships, two Italian customs ships and two tugs.

Most notably, the navy said on Twitter that the frigate *Bersagliere* had rescued 778 migrants while the patrol boat *Vega* had picked up another 675.

Some of the rescued migrants were expected to arrive overnight on the Italian island of Lampedusa, the closest to the African coast, while most of the others are expected to

Kerry meets
Tamil leaders in
Colombo

WORLD 14



UK elections
enter final
gripping week

WORLD 15

IN PICTURES

Photo: AFP

Britain's Prince William and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge show their newly-born daughter, their second child, to the media outside the Lindo Wing at St Mary's Hospital in central London, on May 2. Kensington Palace announced the Duchess of Cambridge was safely delivered of a daughter weighing 8lbs 3oz. The newly-born Princess of Cambridge is fourth in line to the British throne.



KATHMANDU

Red tape delays Nepal quake disaster aid

CATHERINE TRAUTWEIN, YUKO MASKAY

GOVERNMENT inefficiency is hampering delivery of aid to victims of the Nepal earthquake - now known to have killed over 7000 people and injured more than 14,000.

As the death toll exceeded 7000 yesterday, and government ministers said it was expected to rise much higher, the UN's humanitarian chief Valerie Amos said she was "extremely concerned" that Nepal's customs authorities are slowing the delivery of earthquake aid. The government of Nepal has been spearheading the country's disaster response, since the 7.8 quake on April 25, but reports of inefficiency and allegations of corruption have followed.

Ms Amos said she worried the foreign aid pouring into Nepal in the wake of the impoverished country's deadliest earthquake in more than 80 years was being held up by red tape.

"I was extremely concerned to hear reports that customs was taking such a long time," Ms Amos said, speaking in Kathmandu on May 2. She added she had asked

Prime Minister Sushil Koirala to speed up customs clearance for aid materials.

"He has undertaken to ensure that happens, so I hope that from now we will see an improvement in those administrative issues."

Planes loaded with relief supplies from around the world have been pouring into landlocked Nepal, but there have been numerous reports of many getting stuck at Kathmandu's small international airport, and even customs officials stopping trucks filled with aid from crossing into the country from neighbouring India.

The manager of Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport said very heavy planes were being barred from landing because of concerns about the condition of the single runway after the quake and a series of strong aftershocks.

"We have issued a notice saying that aircraft with a total weight exceeding 196 tonnes will not be allowed to land at Kathmandu airport," Birendra Prasad Shrestha said.

"There are no visible cracks in the runway but there have been so many tremors recently that we

have to take precautions - we don't know what's happening below the surface."

"This runway is the only lifeline for Kathmandu. If it goes, everything goes."

Meanwhile, concerns have been raised on the ground and online that aid has not been dealt equally to those impacted by the quake.

Comments about inequitable distribution of relief goods have been appearing on social and mainstream media, according to a United Nations earthquake situation report for May 1.

"Humanitarian partners continue to receive unconfirmed reports of unequal distribution and politicisation of humanitarian relief," said a United Nations earthquake situation report for May 2, adding that the Food Security Cluster had claimed relief trucks had been stopped and diverted.

"This poses additional challenges to the Government and humanitarian partners who work around the clock to transport aid to those in need."

In one community hard-hit by the quake, residents alleged the government had given tents to the

police to distribute to the people, but that officials had instead handed them out to relatives.

"Our government is no use. They are slow and disorganised. Radio says there are supplies being given but we don't see anything," said one Northern Nepal resident who appeared visibly angry and frustrated.

"It's always like this. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The rich will get supplies, but the poor will be left scrambling and begging."

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2014, which assesses "perceived levels of public sector corruption" globally, ranked Nepal in the bottom third of its corruption spectrum.

A May 1 tweet from the Nepal Prime Minister's Disaster Relief Fund - which has been raising cash specifically tagged for rescue, treatment, relief, victim rehabilitation and physical infrastructure restoration response to the 2015 earthquake, according to its website - put the fund's sum at more than 150 million Nepalese rupees (US\$1.5 million), but said only NPR1.5 million (\$15,000) had been doled out.

The Associated Press reported on April 30 that a Government radio station, Radio Nepal, said the administration would make NPR100,000 (\$1000) available to families of the dead, with NPR40,000 (\$400) added for funeral arrangements.

Reluctant to wait on the arrival of official aid, locals have organised grassroots support for the country.

The UN said in its earthquake situation report for May 1 that community and international volunteers had jumped to support aid efforts and that in Kathmandu thousands had volunteered to help

with tasks such as debris clean-up and the collection and distribution of medical supplies and food.

In Kathmandu, trekking company owner Phuri Kitar Sherpa set up a makeshift camp for those in need, supplying inhabitants with potable water and shelter. He said people that are able to help should do so and should not rely on governmental or international aid.

Others in the area have also moved to take matters into their own hands. One Kathmandu community came together to gather supplies in boxes, with one resident calling out over a loudspeaker, "We cannot rely on the government. We must help ourselves and each other."

Dr Rajesh Jha with Nepali NGO Sano Paila (A Little Step) urged people in Nepal to take matters into their own hands.

"[We are] trying to collaborate with the government but the process is very slow. Hard-hit villages are hard to get to," he said. "Don't wait for the government - individuals should be vigilant about washing hands ... [and] managing waste."

- With AFP

BALTIMORE

Baltimore police officers charged with killing

PROTESTERS in Baltimore erupted in celebration on May 2 and hundreds of people broke the city's curfew, a day after six police officers were charged over the death of an African-American man in their custody.

The death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray had sparked rioting and days of protests in the US East Coast port city over alleged police racism and brutality.

But the mood on the streets was drastically different on May 2, with people singing and dancing as they cheered the charges including second-degree murder and manslaughter laid against the six police officers, three of them black.

As calm gradually returned to the city, the governor of Maryland state urged residents to make yesterday a day of "prayer and peace".

"I pray [it] will be a day of reflection and will serve as a foundation for how we all conduct ourselves in the days and months to come," Governor Larry Hogan said in a statement.

City police commissioner Anthony Batts echoed that sentiment, saying, "My hope is that we work towards a new level of partnership in all parts of our community as we move forward."

A string of killings of unarmed African-American men by the police in recent months have ignited protests across the country. Charges are rarely brought against officers.

The May 1 charges therefore came as a surprise to the city of 620,000, about an hour's drive north of Washington.

A spontaneous street party of thousands of people erupted in Baltimore on May 2. Demonstrators, white and black, also gathered at City Hall, the focal point of rallies in recent days.

"I am so inspired and encouraged by what I see," Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake told CBS television affiliate WJZ.

"I think that there's a lot of hope that in peace we can seek justice."

After the rally, protesters marched toward the neighborhood where Mr Gray was arrested on April 12. He died a week later from his injuries.

"Whose streets? Our streets!" they chanted.

"It's been a frustration, what's going on. Now we want to stop police brutality. We want peace," Autumn Hooper, a 25-year-old African American woman, said.

The death of Mr Gray has

eignited simmering resentment in the United States over law enforcement tactics, particularly in their dealings with African Americans.

In video recorded of the incident in Baltimore, Mr Gray appeared to be in pain as he was hustled into a police van. He died seven days later with 80 percent of his spine severed at the neck, lawyers for his family have said.

His death has prompted rallies in many other major American cities, including New York, Philadelphia and the capital Washington, in echoes of the protests that broke out across the United States last year over the fatal police shooting of an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri.

The medical examiner found that Mr Gray's death was a homicide and Maryland state prosecutor Marilyn Mosby announced on May 1 an investigation found probable cause for criminal charges.

Ms Mosby said Mr Gray "suffered a severe and critical neck injury as a result of being handcuffed, shackled by his feet and unrestrained" inside a moving police van following his arrest.

Ms Mosby, an African-American woman who is the daughter, granddaughter and niece of police officers, said Mr Gray had been "illegally arrested" as "no crime had been committed".

Baltimore's police union condemned what it called "an egregious rush to judgment", as it defended the officers and expressed confidence they would be cleared.

While some expressed relief that the police officers had been charged, others cautioned that it was only the first step in a process that once again casts a damning spotlight on race relations in the United States.

Lawyer and activist Malik Shabazz pressed Ms Mosby, "Don't [back] off," as he addressed a calm, mostly young crowd under sunny spring skies.

He led demonstrators in a chant of "No justice, no peace!"

Mr Shabazz also urged Maryland's governor to end the curfew in Baltimore, which business owners say is hurting them seriously, and to order out National Guard troops.

"I ask respectfully, Governor Hogan, back up your troops," he said.

Maryland's branch of the ACLU, the largest US civil rights organisation, also said "the curfew no longer serves its intended purpose" in a statement. - AFP



Protesters hug each other on May 2 in the Sandtown neighborhood of Baltimore, Maryland, where Freddie Gray was arrested. Photo: AFP

LONDON

UK elections enter gripping final week

AFTER a sterile campaign that has turned many people off, Britons take to the polls on May 7 in a too-close-to-call general election that could trigger an unprecedented bout of political instability.

The vote could help decide whether Britain stays in the European Union and whether Scotland remains in Britain, as well as putting some of Westminster's biggest names out of a job.

"This is the tightest election in living memory," said Professor Philip Cowley of Nottingham University. "It will almost certainly see the biggest change in the British party system in over 100 years."

Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservatives have been virtually tied with Ed Miliband's Labour in opinion polls for months and both have fought risk-averse campaigns largely avoiding actual voters.

Mr Cameron, 48, has shown more passion in the last 10 days of the campaign, saying he feels "pumped" and "bloody lively" after being criticised for his uninspiring style.

Mr Miliband, 45, has exceeded expectations with a string of assured performances which challenged his reputation as a geek who struggles to connect with voters.

But polls suggest neither the centre-right Conservatives nor centre-left Labour will win the election outright.

That would trigger days or even weeks of haggling as both sides fight to persuade smaller parties to support them in government.

Millions of Britons will cast their ballots on May 7. If one party wins more than half of the House of Commons' 650 seats, it can form a government alone and that party's leader becomes prime minister.

However, this looks like being the third election since 1929 where Britain will get a hung parliament, in which no one party has a majority.

That will bring to the fore smaller parties, who could play a key role in determining who governs Britain.

The pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) looks set to win most of Scotland's 59 seats, up from just six.

Although an SNP-led campaign for Scottish independence was defeated in a referendum last year, the party has seen its support surge since then under new leader Nicola Sturgeon.

The SNP is willing to back a Labour minority government but Mr Miliband has ruled out any deal with them while not excluding accepting their support on a vote-by-vote basis.



British Prime Minister David Cameron addresses workers during a UK general election campaign event at ASDA supermarket's headquarters in Leeds, northern England, on May 1. Britain could face days or even weeks of negotiations to form a new government after elections on May 7, with opinion polls suggesting that no one party will win outright. Photo: AFP

The Conservatives claim that could hasten Scottish independence as the SNP extract concessions from Labour in return for their support.

Mr Cameron's Conservatives could again team up with the centrist Liberal Democrats, with whom they have been in a coalition government since 2010.

But LibDem support has plunged in the last five years and leader Nick Clegg, who led them into the coalition, could lose his seat.

Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP) could be prepared to support the Tories but only looks set to win a few seats.

Experts say Britain will look quite different after the election depending on whether the Conservatives or

Labour get in, even as a minority government.

One of the biggest campaign issues has been what to do about a budget deficit of nearly £90 billion (US\$130 billion).

Both the main parties want to eliminate it, but Labour would do so by increasing taxes on the rich, while the Conservatives want to cut welfare spending by a further £12 billion.

Paul Johnson, director of the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS), a research body, said there were "genuinely big differences in our view on economic and fiscal matters" and called it "the biggest choice the British electorate has seen in a generation".

At Westminster, life in a minority

government would be tough. Even if the system of fixed-term parliaments, introduced in 2011, does curb instability, the new administration could experience difficulties in passing legislation.

Another Cameron term would have the added complication of a referendum on EU membership which he has promised by 2017 if he wins.

Mr Cameron could also face a leadership challenge from a figure like London Mayor Boris Johnson after announcing he does not want to stay in Downing Street beyond 2020.

"Like going into jail and handing the other party the key" is how Cowley described minority government.

Britain's prime minister could soon be yearning for life on the outside. —AFP

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KUALA LUMPUR

May Day activists arrested in KL

MORE than two dozen protesters including a leading human rights activist and opposition politicians were detained overnight in Malaysia in what one lawyer said on May 2 was an attempt to silence government critics.

The demonstrators were arrested late May 1 following a May Day rally that drew thousands to the streets of Kuala Lumpur, their lawyers said.

Among those arrested was Ambiga Sreenevasan, a widely respected human rights activist and former president of Malaysia's Bar Council who campaigns for democratic and electoral reforms.

Her lawyer N Surendran said Ms Ambiga was detained for sedition and for unlawful assembly with an intention to overthrow the government.

"This is ridiculous," he said.

"These arrests are scare tactics by the police to deter people from opposing the government."

He added that police sought to extend Ms Ambiga's detention on May 2.

However, police efforts to obtain a remand order was rejected by a magistrate and she was released in the afternoon.

Michelle Yesudas, a lawyer who is representing 29 protesters arrested, said that even though Ms Ambiga was released the police may continue investigating her.

Phil Robertson, the deputy director of Human Rights Watch Asia, had called Ms Ambiga's arrest "absolutely outrageous" and added, "Speaking and attending a rally is not a crime; let her go unconditionally."

Among other prominent figures arrested were the chief of the Socialist Party of Malaysia and a senior lawmaker from the opposition Democratic Action Party.

They were also released on May 2 after police failed to obtain a



An Malaysian anarchist group holds placards and their own flags in front of the Malaysia's landmark Petronas Twin Towers during a May Day protest against GST (goods and services tax) in Kuala Lumpur on May 1.

remand order from a magistrate, said Mr Yesudas.

Mr Yesudas added that 23 protestors, mostly young adults, were expected to be released on today while six who are below the age of 18 were to be released by the end of the week.

Meanwhile, local media reported that police had detained opposition People's Justice Party secretary-general Rafizi Ramli on May 2.

"This wave of arrests should raise alarm bells among interna-

tional friends of Malaysia about just how far the powers that be in Putrajaya are dragging the country off the path of democratic, rights-respecting governance," Mr Robertson said in a statement.

The May 1 protest saw thousands of Malaysians taking to the streets despite sweltering tropical heat, mostly to demand an end to a recently implemented goods and services tax.

Malaysia has seen a wave of arrests of government critics under the Sedition Act, although few have

actually been jailed.

Analysts view the blitz as a bid by the long-ruling government to silence adversaries as it loses ground to the reform-minded opposition.

Tightening the screws, Prime Minister Najib Razak's government recently pushed through even tougher sedition penalties and an anti-terrorism bill that allows detention without judicial review.

Amnesty International said the moves were turning Malaysia into a "human rights black hole."

— AFP

SEOUL

N Korea to launch more satellites

NORTH Korean leader Kim Jong-Un vowed to launch more "satellites" in order to become a space power, state media said yesterday, despite global condemnation on past launches, dubbed disguised ballistic missile tests.

Mr Kim, during a visit to the North's newly built satellite command centre, urged scientists to work harder to "further glorify the [North] as a space power", state-run KCNA said.

"The status of the [North] as a satellite producer-launcher remains unchanged though the hostile forces deny it and its space development can never be abandoned, no matter who may oppose," Mr Kim was quoted as saying.

The new, 13,770 square-metre command centre will provide a "solid springboard for continued launch of various working satellites", the KCNA said.

More satellites will be launched into outer space at the time and locations set by the ruling Workers' Party, Mr Kim said, adding that such projects are "legitimate rights" of the country.

The impoverished but nuclear-armed North in December 2012 launched a satellite into orbit, describing it as a purely peaceful scientific project. But the UN condemned the move as a disguised ballistic missile test, banned under the UN resolutions triggered by its nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009.

Pyeongyang, angered by fresh UN sanctions following the launch, conducted its third nuclear test – its most powerful to date – in February 2013.

The 2012 satellite launch was seen as a major step forward for the North's nuclear weapons program, as long-range missile delivery capability had long been cited as its main weakness.

There is little doubt that the North has an active ballistic missile development program, but expert opinion is split on just how much progress it has made. — AFP

COLOMBO

Kerry meets Tamil leaders in Colombo

US Secretary of State John Kerry held talks with Sri Lanka's top Tamil leaders yesterday as he wrapped up an overnight visit pushing reconciliation in the island after decades of ethnic war.

Mr Kerry met with heads of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main political party from the ethnic minority, one day after holding talks with Sri Lanka's new President Maithripala Sirisena and his government.

US officials said TNA leader Rajavaroatham Sampanthan and several other senior party officials held talks at Mr Kerry's hotel in the capital Colombo.

The top US diplomat, whose presence in Colombo marked the island's return to the world diplomatic fold, heaped praise on the new government of Mr Sirisena who toppled former strongman Mahinda Rajapakse at January elections.

Mr Kerry pledged support to ensure "true reconciliation" in Sri Lanka six years after the end of its 37-year-old Tamil separatist war which claimed at least 100,000 lives.

Giving a speech on May 2, Mr Kerry echoed a long-standing Tamil demand to investigate the cases of thousands who went missing in the final stages of the brutal conflict that ended in May 2009.

"Try to find wherever the truth may lead. No matter how painful

that truth is," Mr Kerry said. "It's the right and the humane thing to do – and it is, believe it or not, an essential part of the healing process."

The TNA is in the opposition, but supports Mr Sirisena's administration which has also promised to investigate allegations that up to 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed by troops under Mr Rajapakse's command.

Mr Kerry has promised technical assistance for any probe and also urged Mr Sirisena to free hundreds of Tamils who are still being held without any charges against them.

During Mr Rajapakse's decade-long rule, Washington was close to slapping sanctions on Colombo for refusing to allow investigations into claims of mass killings and rights abuses at the end of the war between the separatist Tamil Tigers and government forces.

As Sri Lanka's relations with the West and regional powerhouse India soured, Mr Rajapakse turned increasingly to Beijing, with Chinese-funded investments projects springing up across Sri Lanka.

Since coming to power, Mr Sirisena has tried to reset the diplomatic balance, choosing New Delhi for his first foreign visit and offering the hand of friendship to other key players who fell out with his predecessor. — AFP

SYDNEY

Australia-Indonesia relations can recover from executions: Abbott

PRIME Minister Tony Abbott said he was confident Australia could restore its relationship with Indonesia despite anger over the execution of two drug convicts, whose bodies are understood to have been returned home on May 2.

Andrew Chan, 31, and Myuran Sukumaran, 34, were killed by firing squad on April 29 over their role in a plot to bring heroin to Australia from the Indonesian resort island of Bali, despite international pleas to Jakarta for clemency.

Mr Abbott said he understood the dismay and anger over the executions but respected Indonesia's sovereignty.

"It really was terrible that these cruel and unnecessary executions went ahead," he told reporters in Sydney.

"Our anger and our grief, sadly, is not going to bring those two young men back. The important thing now is not to do anything that would make a difficult situation worse."

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade was unable to confirm reports that the men's bodies were on a flight which touched down early on May 2 in Sydney.

The flight was carrying Me Sukumaran's parents, brother and sister and Mr Chan's wife Febyanti Herewila, who married him on the

eve of his execution.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation said Mr Chan's mother and brother were understood to have wanted to travel back with his body, but were unable to due to a hold-up with the repatriation. They returned on May 1.

Mr Chan and Mr Sukumaran were among seven foreigners and one Indonesian executed in Indonesia in the early hours of April 29.

The Australians had spent a decade in prison for their role in masterminding the so-called "Bali Nine" group of smugglers, during which time Mr Chan had become a Christian pastor and Mr Sukumaran had studied art.

The executions have cast a shadow over Australia's relationship with its important neighbour Indonesia, with Mr Abbott withdraw-

'Our anger and our grief, sadly, is not going to bring those two young men back.'

Tony Abbott
Australian prime minister

ing Canberra's ambassador to Indonesia. But the prime minister said on May 2 that it remained important for the country's future that the relationship with Jakarta be restored.

"I am confident that we will be able to rebuild the relationship," Mr Abbott said.

"It's important to Australia, it's important to Indonesia and it's important to the wider world that Australia and Indonesia's friendship is strong and growing."

Australia and Indonesia are key allies in counter-terrorism efforts, while Indonesia is also a significant economic partner.

Earlier, Mr Abbott had described as "odd" a decision by the Australian Catholic University (ACU) to introduce scholarships in memory of the executed pair for Indonesian students wishing to study in Australia.

"We did this because ACU is committed to the dignity of the human person, and that applies equally to all human beings: victims as well as to those who have been convicted of crimes," Vice Chancellor Greg Craven said.

Mr Abbott said the men had met their deaths with a "kind of nobility", but he added, "I know part of Christian faith is forgiveness, but another part of Christian faith is calling people to be their best selves," he told commercial radio late. — AFP



Culinary new wave puts Taiwan on foodie map

A new wave of restaurants, serving up the island's traditional culinary creations with a modern twist, has made Taiwan a favourite foodie destination

PURGENT slices of fermented tofu, piping hot pork buns and crisp green guava slices are some of Taiwan's classic street eats, with the best stalls attracting queues of locals and visitors.

Now these no-frills favourites are being joined by a new wave of restaurants tapping in to the island's abundant fresh produce and vibrant cuisine.

Their fusion of seasonal menus and slick interiors at modest prices is starting to create an international buzz - *Condé Nast Traveller* magazine has labelled Taiwan as the "foodie destination of 2015".

The island's star chef, Andre Chiang - who trained in France and runs the acclaimed Restaurant Andre in Singapore - recently opened his first venue on home turf, RAW, in northern Taipei.

It serves up seasonal Taiwanese produce crafted into what Chiang calls a "new interpretation" of the island's culinary traditions.

"They are all humble ingredients - but when you start to match them in a different way, you create something interesting," he said.

RAW's seven-course menu changes every month and features 21 Taiwanese ingredients in peak season at the time.

Tiny shrimp nestle inside purple rice crackers; three types of cauliflower are layered onto thin wafers of chicken skin; a version of the island's famed sweet treat, the pineapple cake, is presented as three semi-frozen cubes.

The full tasting menu costs Tw\$1850 (US\$60), which Chiang calls "accessible" compared with the island's expensive fine-dining options, mostly the preserve of high-end hotels.

RAW, which opened in December, is part of 38-year-old Chiang's mission to help carve out a fresh global identity for Taiwan.

"We used to be Taiwanese, with aboriginal local cuisine, then we were colonised for 50 years by the Japanese, then there was the takeover by the Chinese [nationalist] government.

"We can't cut those influences out of our history."

Now entrepreneurial restaurateurs are finding their feet, and it's not just about the food.

"Small independent restaurants ... are starting to take Taiwanese local produce and are doing it in a more international way, with both the cuisine and the design," said Chiang.

The cavernous space at RAW, designed by Dutch architect Camiel Weijnenberg, is dominated by two huge curved wooden counters made from Taiwanese spruce by local artisans.

The city's growing reputation for creativity led Taipei to be named World Design Capital for 2016 by the International Council of the Societies of Industrial Design.

"People have studied abroad and are bringing ideas back with them. A lot has changed in the last year or two ... There's a big transition at the moment," Weijnenberg said.

At new restaurant Mume, three young chefs use Taiwanese produce to create Western dishes in a bid to fill the gap between simple island fare and pricey fine dining.

The cosy 32-seat venue decked out in dark wood and storm lamps also opened in December, tucked away in a quiet street in Taipei's central Daan district.

"We're starting to get quite a lot of international travellers, probably 20 to 30 percent," said Hong Kong-born founder and chef Richie Lin, 34, who works with Australian chef Kai Ward, 24, and US chef Long Xiong, 32.

Mume serves up plates designed for sharing, from grilled pork neck and Wagyu beef tartare to squid, clams and roasted romanesco broccoli, with an average spend of around Tw\$2000 (\$65).

Desserts include an orange sorbet in an edible candied peel shell, designed to show off the best of Taiwanese citrus.

"As chefs we all like to use sustainable products that belong to the place," said Lin, adding that 90 percent of ingredients on the menu are local.

But as the food and design scene evolves, Taiwan's old-school street eats remain a must-try.

At Raohe night market in eastern Taipei, the queue at one family-run pork bun stall snakes down the road.

It has been serving up baked flaky pastry pockets filled with spicy pork - known as *hu jiao bing* or "pepper cakes" - for more than 20 years.

"The pork is mixed with 10 Chinese herbs. It originally came from China, from Xiamen, but we have adapted it. The pastry is more flexible and chevy and the herbs make the taste fresher," said cook Yang Rui-fu, 38, whose sister set up the stall.

The pastry buns sell for Tw\$50 (\$1.50), with around 1800 customers throughout the afternoon and evening.

Yang, who mans the stall's charcoal ovens, says that with Taiwanese chefs travelling abroad and more tourists coming to the island, its cuisine is starting to earn a wider reputation.

"When I was young, we only had Taiwanese customers, but there are now more people from European countries" as well as from across Asia, he said.

For French interns Simon Gosset, 24, and Keyvan Nybelen, 22, their month in Taiwan has been a culinary revelation.

"We've tried lots of different dishes: sausages, dumplings, pig's blood with rice, guava," Gosset said, as they browsed the Raohe stalls.

"We really like the food here. We knew nothing about it before we came." - AFP



A local chef prepares food at the Raohe night market in Taipei. Photos: AFP/Sam Yeh



The RAW restaurant was designed by Dutch architect Camiel Weijnenberg in Taipei.



Tourists and local residents eat and browse for food at the Raohe night market in Taipei.



Taiwanese star chef Andre Chiang - who trained in France and runs the acclaimed Restaurant Andre in Singapore - checks food in the kitchens of his first venue on home turf, RAW, in northern Taipei.

FILM REVIEW

A bear-hug of a family treat

Ben Wishaw proves the perfect voice for a CGI Paddington as endearing as the old 70s favourite

PADDINGTON

WHAT headline-grabbing scandals have attended the return of Paddington Bear:

First, there was his conscious uncoupling from Colin Firth (too old, apparently); next came Nicole Kidman's announcement that his new movie was too scary for her kids; then outrage as the censors slapped a PG-rating on scenes of innuendo, dangerous behaviour and extreme marmalade. Perhaps most shockingly was the revelation that a 21st-century computer-generated big-screen bear can be every bit as endearingly entertaining as his 70s TV stop-motion counterpart. Paddington's creator, Michael Bond, says he "slept soundly" after seeing the movie, and those in search of a family-friendly festive film treat will doubtless do the same.

Abandoning darkest Peru after an earthquake, our diminutive hero arrives in London where he proceeds to wreak healing havoc in the home of the Browns; uptight dad Henry (Hugh Bonneville), vivacious mum Mary (Sally Hawkins), and troubled kids in need of some bear-based bonding. Nicole Kidman's trigger-happy taxidermist Millicent has other plans, however, seducing creepy neighbour Mr Curry (a splendidly sniffy Peter Capaldi) into helping her steal and stuff the new arrival. It's terrifically good-hearted fare, painting a colourful portrait of London as a multicultural melting pot with a just a hint of old school Poppins charm.



Marmalade sandwiches: A favourite with bears, not so much with commuters.

The jokes are good too, ranging from laugh-out-loud observations about the transformative effects of parenthood (and knowing mentions of "exotic wrestlers") to slapstick bathroom episodes. Ben Wishaw turns out to be the

perfect voice of Paddington, his lilting diction at once childlike and wise, his delivery naive yet oddly noble. "Please look after this bear", says the tag around Paddington's neck. Rest assured, they have. - *The Guardian*

Nepal's rich cultural heritage devastated by quake

SUJAN Shrestha says it breaks his heart to look at the piles of rubble that are all that remain of the ancient Nepalese temples where he has worshipped all his life.

The 28-year-old shopkeeper grew up in a house just off Patan Durbar Square, a spectacular World Heritage site in the quake-hit Kathmandu Valley packed with ornately carved Hindu temples, statues and a royal palace.

"We were always told that a big one was coming, but I never imagined that it would be this devastating," he said as he looked over the ruined square where he used to sell pashminas to tourists.

"I cannot believe that those temples collapsed. This place looks incomplete without them. It breaks my heart when I look around."

The 7.8-magnitude earthquake that hit on April 25 has devastated the Himalayan nation's rich cultural heritage and left the Kathmandu Valley's three former royal squares in ruins.

The squares, which date back to when the valley was divided into three Hindu kingdoms, are at the heart of local life as well as being a huge draw to a country that relies heavily on tourist dollars.

"The quake left an impact on 90 percent of our heritage sites. It is difficult to value the loss," said Bheshe Narayan Dahal, the director general of the Department of Archaeology.

"The very next day after the earthquake, a team was deployed to assess the damage and make an inventory of what was found.

"Our concern is to not let any antiquity or items of value leave the site. Our teams are working to keep a record and collect details."

'This is our heritage, and we have to protect it'

Prakesh Sharma

Police deputy superintendent

The UN's culture agency UNESCO said the damage to the three squares in Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur - all world heritage sites - was "absolutely dramatic".

"We are in contact with the government and pushing them very hard to protect these sites and not to increase this damage now," said Christian Manhart, head of UNESCO in Nepal.

In Patan Durbar Square on May 1, 500 Nepalese police officers and soldiers were combing through the rubble to try to salvage what they could for reconstruction.

"We worked all yesterday and have been working since early this morning ... This is our heritage, and we have to protect it," police deputy superintendent Prakesh Sharma said.

To one side, people lined up with buckets to collect water from the ornate stone taps of a traditional Nepalese step well that appeared to have survived the devastation.

"We have survived a human war, but this is nature's war on us," said Sharma, who indicated he was concerned about possible looting of priceless artefacts in the chaotic aftermath of a quake that killed thousands.

UNESCO's Manhart said there were detailed drawings and architectural plans, meaning the monuments could be rebuilt, as many were following the last major quake to hit the valley in 1934.

He also said the agency would work to make the centuries-old monuments more resistant to quakes in the future.

"We will deploy all our resources to reconstruct the sites within five to seven years," said Dahal of the Department of Archaeology.

"This is our pride, our identity and we will work to rebuild it."

The Global Gossip

Amy Winehouse's family condemn documentary about singer

The family of British singer Amy Winehouse, who died aged 27 from alcohol poisoning, condemned a forthcoming documentary about her life as "misleading" last week.

Due to premiere at the Cannes film festival next month, Amy traces Winehouse's story from her early career to the fame she won with hits such as "Rehab", until her death aged 27 in 2011.

A spokesperson for the Winehouse family said they "would like to disassociate themselves from the forthcoming film about their much missed and beloved Amy".

"They feel that the film is a missed opportunity to celebrate her life and talent and that it is both misleading and contains some basic untruths," the spokesperson said in a statement.

"There are specific allegations made against family and management that are unfounded and unbalanced."

The family did not make clear what allegations they objected to.

The documentary is directed by Brit Asif Kapadia, whose film *Senna* about the Brazilian Formula 1 driver won a British Academy Film Award for best documentary in 2011. In a statement, the team behind Amy defended their work. "When we were approached to make the film, we came on board with the full backing of the Winehouse family and we approached the project with total objectivity, as with *Senna*," the filmmakers said.



Amy Winehouse's family say the documentary about her life is "misleading". Photo: Shutterstock



Actress Reese Witherspoon arrives for the premiere of *Hot Pursuit* on April 30 in Los Angeles, California. Photo: AFP/Valerie Macon



German Chancellor Angela Merkel feeds a lemur on April 30 during an official opening of a penguin enclosure at the bird park in Marlow, eastern Germany. Photo: AFP/Stefan Sauer

NEW YORK 'Stand By Me' singer dies age 76

Ben E King, the soul singer whose Gospel-influenced "Stand By Me" became one of the most-broadcast songs of the 20th century, has died at 76, his spokesperson said on May 1. King, who lived in New Jersey, died of natural causes, spokesperson Phil Brown said.

R&B singer and collaborator Gary U S Bonds wrote on Facebook that King was "one of the sweetest, gentlest and gifted souls that I have had the privilege of knowing and calling my friend for more than 50 years".

Discovered while working at his father's restaurant in New York, King had several early hits with doo-wop vocal band The Drifters including "There Goes My Baby" and "Save the Last Dance For Me".

But he had by far his greatest success with "Stand By Me", which King had initially started writing for The Drifters before pursuing the song on his own.

HONG KONG Chinese fortune tellers say Britain's new princess 'strong-willed'

Britain's new princess will be strong-willed and innovative, a free spirit who will re-energise the royal family, Chinese fortune tellers predicted on May 3.

Prince William and his wife Kate's daughter was born May 2, falling under the Chinese zodiac sign of the sheep and with a personal element of earth, according to the ancient Chinese practice of feng shui.

Her birthday combination is "a very strong one", feng shui expert Thierry Chow said. "It indicates that she will give good luck to her family. Being born in the sheep year has certainly helped to create this lucky combination."

The princess, fourth in line to the throne, will be artistic and somewhat of a free spirit, according to Mak Ling-ling - another Hong Kong fortune teller.

"She has artistic talent and does not like to stick with the status quo, unlike her brother who will be more disciplined and reserved," Mak added, referring to Prince George, almost two years older, who was born in the Year of the Snake.

But due to her independent nature she won't want to be reined in, Mak said, advising her father William to avoid spoiling his daughter.

"She will be a happy girl - someone who does not like to follow discipline. When you set rules for her, she'd rather be herself," Mak said. - AFP



The princess will be a "free spirit", say Chinese fortune tellers. Photo: AFP

MOSCOW

Culture is the culprit in Russian morality drive

AFTER the media, the oligarchs and the opposition, Vladimir Putin's Russia is turning up the heat on the arts, with a "blasphemous" opera, a raunchy teen dance show and an "insulting" Hollywood film all taking fire.

Claiming a mission to protect the sensibilities of the Russian people, the Kremlin and the Orthodox Church are leaning on artists to imbue their creations with greater morality.

The attacks go over well in a society steeped in the conservative anti-Western values preached by Putin, who has been isolated by the West over the Ukraine crisis.

Since the Russian strongman burst

'We must protect ourselves against the West which wants to destroy everything here'

Sergei Popkov
Actor

onto the centre stage in 1999, several groups have been called to heel, from journalists to business magnates and human rights activists.

Now the authorities' sights are trained on the cultural sector, with the government keen to promote a new approach.

"The time has come to formulate our own vision of ourselves as heirs to Russia's great, unique civilisation," Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky said, explaining the recent banning of the release of the Hollywood thriller *Child 44*, about a serial killer operating in Joseph Stalin's Russia.

The minister accused the film, which stars Vincent Cassel and Gary Oldman, of the "distortion of historical facts" and depicting Soviet Army officers as "blood-thirsty ghouls".

A few weeks before that, the object of popular wrath was the head of the state-funded Novosibirsk State Opera and Ballet Theatre.

Boris Mezdrich was fired for sensationally depicting Jesus Christ as a character in an erotic movie in his production of Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhaeuser*, triggering an outcry from spectators and the church.

Other productions or works to cause a furore this year included a mural by a street artist in the eastern city of Perm showing the first man in space, Russia's Yuri Gagarin, as a "Jesus of science", being crucified.

The artist faces up to one year in prison.

An exhibition by Canadian artist Frank Rodick of pictures of his dead mother also caused scandal, with church authorities in the Baltic Sea exclave of Kaliningrad calling for "limits on what is tolerable in art".

In another vein entirely, three



Hollywood thriller *Child 44* was recently banned in Russia for depicting Soviet Army officers as "blood-thirsty ghouls."

teens filmed twerking in front of a World War II memorial were sentenced to up to 15 days' imprisonment.

The sentencing came after a video of girls in leotards twerking at a dance school in the southwestern city of Orenburg went viral, prompting the Investigative Committee to launch an indecency probe.

Artists whose work is deemed "blasphemous" also face having the book thrown at them.

In July 2013, lawmakers adopted legislation making it a crime to insult believers' feelings, punishable by up to three years in prison.

From a dozen cases in 2013 the number of prosecutions under the law rose to around 50 last year.

For film director Sergei Selyanov, producer of animated films inspired by Russian folklore, the "censorship aims to fill the void left by the loss of an historic national identity, which was buried together with the USSR".

The current concept of Russian nationhood, said Konstantin Remchukov, chief editor of the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* daily, is based on "two obligatory elements, patriotism and anti-Westernism".

Hostility to the West has flourished among both the elite and ordinary Russians, who have been fed a staple diet of anti-Western fare by the media over the Ukraine crisis and the legalisation of gay marriage in several countries.

A troupe of actors from the western city of Pskov recently came out swinging - against a play in which they themselves were cast.

One of the actors, Sergei Popkov, took issue with the character of a dwarf who becomes king, seeing in it an "allusion to our president".

"We must protect ourselves ... against the West which wants to destroy everything here," he said, demanding a return to Soviet-style cultural censorship.

World War II, or the Great Patriotic War as Russians call it, is a prime example of a sacrosanct subject, where self-censorship is exercised.

Bookshops in Moscow recently pulled their copies of Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer prize-winning graphic novel about a Holocaust survivor, *Maus*, because it features a swastika on the cover.

With parliament having adopted a law in December banning Nazi propaganda the stores decided to play safe rather than risk prosecution. - AFP

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INTERNATIONAL FLIGHT SCHEDULES

Table with 4 columns: Flights, Days, Dep, Arr. Rows include PG 706, 8M 335, TG 304, PG 702, TG 302, PG 708, 8M 331, PG 704, Y5 237, TG 306.

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Table with 4 columns: Flights, Days, Dep, Arr. Rows include MU 2030.

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International Airlines

- All Nippon Airways (NH)
Air Asia (FD)
Air Bagan Ltd. (W9)
Air China (CA)
Air India
Bangkok Airways (PG)
Biman Bangladesh Airlines (BG)
Condor (DE)
Dragonair (KA)
Golden Myanmar Airlines (Y5)
Malaysia Airlines (MH)
Myanmar Airways International (8M)
Nok Airline (DD)
Qatar Airways (QR)
Singapore Airlines (SQ) / Silk Air (MI)
Thai Airways (TG)
Tiger Airline (TR)
Vietnam Airlines (VN)

Airline Codes

- 3K = Jet Star
8M = Myanmar Airways International
AK = Air Asia
BG = Biman Bangladesh Airlines
CA = Air China
CI = China Airlines
CZ = China Southern
DD = Nok Airline
FD = Air Asia
KA = Dragonair
KE = Korea Airlines
MH = Malaysia Airlines
MI = Silk Air
MU = China Eastern Airlines
NH = All Nippon Airways
PG = Bangkok Airways
QR = Qatar Airways
SQ = Singapore Airways
TG = Thai Airways
TR = Tiger Airline
VN = Vietnam Airline
AI = Air India
Y5 = Golden Myanmar Airlines

Subject to change without notice

Day conversion table: 4 = Thursday, 1 = Monday, 2 = Tuesday, 3 = Wednesday, 4 = Thursday, 5 = Friday, 6 = Saturday, 7 = Sunday.



The scenic train journey from Colombo to Kandy passes through tea plantations and rice fields before reaching its destination – the cultural capital of Sri Lanka. Photo: Shutterstock

10 spectacular rail journeys ... you've probably never heard of

Tren de la Libertad, Ecuador
Ecuador's Train of Freedom travels between Otavalo, Ibarra and Salinas in the northern part of the country. Recently renovated, the line passes through the Chota valley, along narrow mountain ledges, hair-raising bridges and lengthy tunnels and offers a gentle ride through spectacular natural surroundings. The train itself is a heritage piece, consisting of red wooden carriages pulled by a silver diesel engine emblazoned with the Ecuadorian colours along its sides.

Jasper to Prince Rupert, Canada
The VIA Rail train service between Jasper and Prince Rupert treats its passengers to beautiful views of Jasper National Park, the Canadian Rockies and the Pacific Coast. It's a two-day journey, which includes an overnight stop-off at Prince George. Those in it for the ride can book seats in the touring class carriages, which are added during peak period of mid-June-September. There you can enjoy panoramic views thanks to extra large windows and reclining seats, as well as a full meal service and complimentary wine.

Spirit of the Outback, Australia
The epic Spirit of the Outback lets you experience Queensland's baking desert countryside - mountains, plains and coast - from the comfort of an air-conditioned carriage. Launched in 1993, it travels from Brisbane to Longreach, via Rockhampton, also taking in historic outback towns. There's a dining car and galley car to kick back in during the 24-hour journey.

Nice to Digne les Bains, France
The last route to remain of the four historic Train des Pignes railways in southern France, the Nice to Digne line is a scenic three-hour ride through mountain passes and alongside fast-flowing rivers. Opened in the 1890s, the line is 151km (94 miles) long and includes an impressive number of tunnels - 27 in total - and one that's 3.5km (2.1 miles) long. The stations themselves are small, quaint affairs, often decked out with flower boxes and vintage clocks.

Belgrade to Bar, Serbia and Montenegro
Connecting the Serbian capital with the seaport of Bar in Montenegro is a stunning railway line that's well known to train buffs but barely heard of among regular travellers. The train rolls through the mountains of Montenegro, with about 250 tunnels and more than 400 bridges to keep you entertained along the way.

Frantsoa to Manakara, Madagascar
This tropical train ride takes passengers through the lush jungle in the south-east of the island, along a railway built in the late 1920s. It's not a glamorous journey: The carriages are run down and some of the track is reported to date back to the 1890s. But this snail-rail adventure is the best way to explore this part of Madagascar. And when we say snail rail, we really mean it. The line may only be 160km (100 miles) in length, but it can take anything up to 12 hours to make it to the end.

Yatsushiro to Hayato, Japan
A rail pass is the best way to travel cheaply around Kyushu, Japan's third-largest island and home to one of world's largest active volcanoes. Amid the rocky terrain, you'll find one of the country's most scenic rides, along the JR Hiatsu line from Yatsushiro to Hayato. The route passes through spectacular, ever-changing scenery, rolling past the glowing Kumagawa River as it snakes through valleys, as well as taking in views of the Kirishima mountain range, where the active volcano Mount Sakurajima smoulders away.

Curitiba to Paranaguá, Brazil
Built in the 1880s, this winding line meanders through the Serra do Mar mountains along Brazil's south-eastern coastline. The three-hour, 100km-long journey on the Serra Verde Express takes passengers through 14 tunnels and across 30 bridges, including the Carvalho Viaduct, with views of vibrant green rainforest all the way.

Colombo to Kandy, Sri Lanka
Connecting Sri Lanka's capital on the coast with its second-largest city, Kandy, in the heart of the island is a beautifully scenic train up into the tea plantations of Central Province. As the train leaves Colombo, you'll roll past jungle and rice fields, eventually climbing up into the forests surrounding Kandy, 500 metres above sea level. The 121km (75-mile) journey can be made daily on a range of trains, some with privately run luxury carriages attached.

Gloggnitz to Mürzzuschlag, Austria
Austria's Semmering railway is a masterpiece of civil engineering, venturing through tunnels and over viaducts as it travels through the mountains of east Austria. Over 100 bridges punctuate the line, which was built between 1848 and 1854, and was awarded UNESCO world heritage status in 1998. Given the picturesque, wooded countryside it passes through, the Semmering line is a bit like an ambitious Hornby railway set come to life. - The Guardian

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for **THE MENTHOLATUM COMPANY**
by its Attorneys-at-Law
Remfry & Sagar
GURGAON
Remfry House
at the Millennium Plaza
Sector-27, Gurgaon-122 009
**New Delhi National Capital
Region, India**
E-Mail: remfry-sagar@remfry.com
Dated: 4th May, 2015

CHENNAI
376-B (Old No. 202)
Avvai Shanmugam Salai,
Gopalapuram
Chennai - n 600 086, India
Tel & Fax 9-44-4263 7392
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'FIGHT OF THE CENTURY'

Amir Khan wants Mayweather fight

B RITAIN'S former two-time light-welterweight world champion Amir Khan has said he wants to be the next opponent for Floyd Mayweather after watching ringside as the American outpointed Manny Pacquiao in the Las Vegas superfight on May 2.

Mayweather kept his unbeaten record with a unanimous points victory over Pacquiao in a welterweight unification showdown that failed to live up to all the pre-match hype, but fully highlighted the winner's superb defensive skills.

Mayweather said after the fight that he would only get in the ring once more - in September - and Khan, 10 years younger at 28, believes he is ideally placed to be the American's final opponent.

"I think the fight is there," Khan told BBC Radio Five Live's *Sportsworld* programme.

"I spoke to Len Ellerbe, his manager. I saw him in the media room and he came over to say 'Hi ... He's ready when you are'.

"I think Mayweather's team are wanting the fight. But then - on the other hand - I've even spoken to Manny's team and they said the same thing. [They said], 'Look Amir, I think it'd be good to have the fight between you and Manny next'.

"So, I'm in a position where I could fight either guy but I think Mayweather's the one I want, because I really believe I have his number."

The Bolton boxer, with 30 wins and three losses to date in his career, is in action later this month in New York taking on Chris Algieri, but he hopes to get in the ring with Mayweather



Mayweather catches Pacquiao with a left. Photo: AFP

later this year or early in 2016.

"I think it would be an amazing fight, one that boxing fans all around are talking about, because I really believe size is a big factor between me and him and the speed and the power as well. I really believe I have his number."

Early reactions to the richest fight in boxing history were mixed with Oscar de la Hoya, a former rival of both Mayweather and Pacquiao, saying on Twitter, "Sorry boxing fans" and "call me old school but I like the fans getting their money's worth by watching an action packed fight."

Former Irish champion Barry McGuigan agreed, saying on his Twitter site "boringly one-sided."

Others though praised the boxing skills of Mayweather as he took his unbeaten streak to 48 wins over 19 years.

Former world heavyweight champion Mike Tyson, who had picked Pacquiao to win, told Sky Sports, "It's him. It's who he is. It's just his time at the moment."

Britain's Lennox Lewis on Twitter said, "If U can't catch it you can't hit it #Maypac that pretty much sums up the fight."

Frank Bruno hailed Floyd Mayweather as a supreme "craftsman" of the boxing ring.

"In this generation you have to go very, very far before you can be a skilled craftsman, businessman, technician, professional and a king in knowing his craft," he told BBC Radio 5 Live's *Sportsworld* program.

"As a boxer you've got to admire him. He's got to go down as one of the greats." - AFP

Filipinos groan in disappointment as Pacquiao loses

MILLIONS of boxing fans in the Philippines shouted and groaned in disappointment yesterday as national hero Manny Pacquiao lost to American rival Floyd Mayweather in the "fight of the century".

Filipinos filled gymnasiums, cinemas and bars across the nation to watch Pacquiao's 12-round battle with Mayweather in Las Vegas, which he lost in a unanimous points decision that many at home deemed unfair.

"There should be a rematch. Pacquiao won't accept this defeat. He is still fighting and he is still strong," government clerk Willie Mirabuena, 48, told AFP.

Mirabuena was among thousands of mostly poor people who had gathered in the main public square of Manila's Marikina suburb to watch the fight on a giant screen mounted on the back of a flat-bed truck.

In the southern port city of Zamboanga, loud boos echoed inside an army gymnasium where thousands of soldiers and their relatives also watched Pacquiao.

"The decision was unfair. From the start, the commentators were for Manny. Everyone is disappointed," Lieutenant Colonel Noel Precioso said as others nearby expressed similar sentiments.

"Manny was the sure winner. We are not satisfied and we are totally

disappointed," said army soldier Cris Delfin, who brought his young son with him to watch the fight.

The Southeast Asian nation of 100 million people ground to a halt as most people stopped to watch Pacquiao, a unifying figure in a country beset by grinding poverty, serial natural calamities and corruption.

Pacquiao's rags-to-riches story, from high school dropout to millionaire world boxing champion in an unprecedented eight weight divisions, is a huge source of hope and pride in the Philippines.

Pacquiao is an "inspiration for every Filipino," President Benigno Aquino said in a statement before the fight.

Presidential spokesperson Edwin Lacierda said immediately after the loss that it had not diminished Pacquiao's standing in the Philippines.

"Pacquiao is truly the People's Champ. He fought for respect, not points. He won the hearts of the world," Lacierda said in a statement.

Pacquiao, 36, leveraged his boxing popularity to get elected in parliament in 2010 and he has said he may run for president in the future.

Pacquiao is also a coveted endorser of international and local brands and has starred in self-produced movies, television shows and music albums.

- AFP

Rebels and soldiers watch bout

IN a rare common cause, both rebels and soldiers in the war-torn southern Philippines watched local boxing icon Manny Pacquiao take on Floyd Mayweather.

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the country's largest Muslim armed group, watched the fight on a widescreen TV at a compound in the southern province of Maguindanao, said MILF vice-chair Ghadzali Jaafar.

"They asked me if they could show it outside my office. I told them okay, I see no problem with that," Jaafar told AFP.

He said both MILF members and non-members were free to attend the showing in the tightly guarded compound barely a kilometre from the MILF's heavily armed main camp.

When asked before the fight whether he expected that there would be no trouble during the fight, he said, "We pray for that. That is our hope."

Regional military spokesperson Captain Joan Petinglay confirmed that the military forces in Maguindanao would also have their own showing of the fight in a gymnasium on May 3.

The Philippines has been known to come to a standstill during its boxing hero's fights, with criminals and guerrillas of various stripes eagerly following his matches. - AFP

RUGBY UNION

Japan 'dreaming of fish and chips' after battering Hong Kong

JAPAN coach Eddie Jones admitted his side were "a long way off" being ready for the World Cup despite crushing Hong Kong 41-0 in the Asian rugby championship on May 2.

After watching the "Brave Blossoms" dish out a roasting to the visitors to make it two wins out of two in the inaugural Asian tournament, Jones complained his players were still "dreaming of fish and chips" following a recent training trip to England.

"This week some of our players haven't been sleeping and we still

have players waking up at three in the morning," Jones told reporters, partly blaming Japan's erratic performance on the effects of jet-lag.

"We are a long way from where need to be. But we got a bit more of the rust off us and I was pleased with the intent," added the former Australia coach. "It was a real mental test and it was a step in the right direction - not a big step, but a good step."

Japan's butter-fingered display in Tokyo had Jones squirming on the sidelines, their problems summed up when winger Akihito Yamada was flattened and left in a heap by teammate Karne Hesketh in the first half.

ASIA



Japan's Ryu Koliniasi Holani (top centre) carries the ball against Hong Kong during their Asia Rugby Championship match at Prince Chichibu Memorial Rugby Ground in Tokyo on May 2. Photo: AFP

"We must have picked up a hand disease in England," said Jones sheepishly. "We've got to find some way to get rid of it. We tried to find some rhythm but we were marred by some individual errors."

Yamada darted over the try line twice while Hesketh, Luke Thompson and substitute Yoshikazu Fujita were also among the try scorers, but Japan produced little to strike fear into World Cup opponents South Africa, Scotland, Samoa and the United States.

Japan toiled to beat South Korea 56-30 two weeks ago in their opening game of the Asian rugby championship and Jones insisted they

still had plenty of work to do before rugby's showcase event begins in September.

"Against Korea we were probably at 20 percent," said Jones, slightly exaggerating how far away Japan were from peak form.

"We were probably 21 percent today. If we improve by 1 percent every day between now and the World Cup we will be at 100 percent by September 19."

Jones cut a frustrated figure after a game littered with 31 penalties.

"The scrums were a mess," he grumbled. "But it's hard when the opposition don't want to scrum, and

it's difficult to play away from the set piece with a referee like that."

Hong Kong coach Andrew Hall bravely put a positive spin on his team's whitewash after a second successive defeat.

"Despite the fact the score says 41 points and nothing to us, there's a sense of positivity," insisted the Scot.

Japan broke into the world's top 10 for the first time last year after a string of 10 successive wins, including a victory over Six Nations side Italy.

The Japanese have played at all seven previous World Cups but won just one game, beating Zimbabwe in 1991. - AFP

FOOTBALL

Losing AFF start for Myanmar women

MATT ROEBUCK

matt.d.roebuck@gmail.com

MYANMAR'S women footballers battled hard to start their campaign for the ASEAN Football Federation Championships with a win in Vietnam but eventually succumbed 3-2 to the hosts in their opening Group B game on May 2.

The girls from the Golden Land were immediately placed on the back foot when Do Thi Yen put the home team ahead with a shot driven low from outside the box in only the 5th minute. Myanmar was not subdued though and equalised in the 12th minute when defender Khin Moe Wai left the keeper standing with her shot that followed a corner.

In the 21st Myanmar seized the ad-



Myanmar's Khin Moe Wai (right) in action on May 2. Photo: MFF/Facebook

vantage and attacked down the left flank for Naw Ar Lo Wer Phaw to put the visitors in the lead. But a busy first half-hour was rounded off by Vietnamese strike Nguyen Thi Minh Nguyet latching onto a long pass, driving the ball over the head of keeper Mya Ngon to even the score in the 29th.

Although both sides continued to look to regain the lead, it was not until the 83rd minute that the head of Huynh Nhu secured the three points for Vietnam from close range.

In the second half, both Vietnamese and Myanmar players still performed well, striving for the lead, but their efforts were not paid off.

The result will be a disappointment for the Myanmar women but does not put them out of the running for

reaching the semi-final just yet. Myanmar rank 43rd on the FIFA Women's Ranking, nine places below Vietnam but will be considered favourites going into their final two group games. Today they face the Philippines at 3:30pm MMT, who are ranked 82nd and on May 6 they'll square off against 89th ranked Malaysia. In the other opening match of Group B, the Philippines dominated Malaysia 3-0.

Elsewhere in the competition Australia U20 beat Thailand - who will be featuring at this year's World Cup in Canada - 3-0, before being held to only one goal in their victory over Laos.

Thailand were to play Indonesia in the later game on May 3, after the archipelago nation lost 2-0 to Laos in their opening skirmish.

FOOTBALL

Big club visits good for Asia, says AFC

VISITS by big European clubs to Asia are good for football in the region, a senior Asian official has insisted, dismissing concerns over the trips.

European clubs are welcomed by thousands of star-struck fans, but critics say their popularity comes at the expense of local leagues, many of which are struggling.

However, Asian Football Confederation general secretary Alex Soosay said complaints about the money-spinning tours were wide of the mark.

"We've seen Chelsea, Arsenal, Liverpool, Manchester [United] travelling to Indonesia, Malaysia, China," Soosay said at the AFC congress in Bahrain.

"These are the countries where football is now taking off. China did well in the 2015 Asian Cup and there's a lot of interest gathered there.

"Indonesia [have] potential. So there's great popularity. That's important. And I don't believe this popularity will affect in any way or damage in any way, but will encourage."

Real Madrid, Liverpool and Arsenal are among the teams headed to Asia in the coming months, in visits which boost their fanbase and merchandise sales.

Soosay said the visiting clubs raise football's profile and help development through their coaching clinics and by funding facilities like new pitches.

"There's a lot of following in Asia for the European clubs. If you go to China you hear 'Chelsea, Chelsea'. If you go to Malaysia you hear 'Manchester, Manchester,'" he said.

"So this kind of interest is very encouraging, not only to those ardent followers but also for the children."

He added, "The big clubs are coming, giving interest and at the same time adding a bit of value." - AFP

FOOTBALL

China's World Cup hopes get AFC boost

ASIA'S football body has thrown its weight behind an eventual World Cup bid by China and insisted the teeming wider region deserves greater representation at the tournament.

Asian Football Confederation general secretary Alex Soosay told AFP that "China has everything a World Cup should offer."

"They have the facilities, they have the infrastructure, they have the economy. So I don't think you can deny China," he said in an interview in Bahrain.

"I believe they have the potential. Asia's always backed China. Hopefully with the prospect of hosting a World Cup it will further propel Chinese football."

Since a major corruption purge, Chinese football has hit new heights, with its first AFC Champions League win in 2013 and a surge by the national team.

President Xi Jinping has also made football a priority with a masterplan released in January which envisages hosting and ultimately winning the World Cup.

A well-placed source told AFP at this week's AFC congress in Manama that senior Chinese officials had already discussed a joint bid for the 2026 and 2030 World Cups.

An extra World Cup spot for Asia, which currently has four slots and access to an inter-continental

play-off, could make a big difference to China and the rest of the region.

"Definitely we deserve [another] half-slot. We have four-and-a-half now," Soosay said. "We deserve the half."

Asia's teams finished winless at last year's World Cup, but co-hosts South Korea reached the 2002 semi-finals and South Africa 2010 was also encouraging for the region.

Qualifying is under way for Russia 2018 but many Asian countries have set their sights on 2022, when Qatar will host the region's second World Cup.

"We don't want Asian teams to be embarrassed in 2022," said Soosay,

praising last month's appointment of ex-Scotland boss Andy Roxburgh as AFC technical director.

"Asia's dream is to win the World Cup. So we brought Andy to win the World Cup," he said.

"And we know, Andy did that in Europe and Andy is a capable man of doing that in Asia."

"Not putting a lot of pressure on Andy, but we know Andy's experience, Andy's expertise."

Roxburgh himself responded with far less bravado earlier this week after he was asked when an Asian team would win football's biggest prize.

"Good question!" laughed the Scot, shaking his head. - AFP

Sport

'Money' beats Manny

SPORT 22



CHINLONE

Region's chinlone players stand together



The Thai chinlone team compete at the 2013 SEA Games. Photo: Staff

THAN NAING SOE
thenaingsoe@gmail.com

THAILAND'S chinlone squad have arrived in Mandalay to train in advance of June's Southeast Asian Games and the Myanmar Chinlone Federation is covering the cost of their neighbourly rivals' visit.

For the next three weeks, Bahtoo Stadium, home of the city's MNL representatives Yadanarbon FC, will play host to the clicking sound of the traditional rattan ball as the Thai national chinlone squad adopt the stadium as a training centre.

"The Thai team asked to visit Myanmar to assist in amending their game, so we were happy to invite them," said Zaw Maung Maung Myint, secretary of the chinlone federation.

So keen are the Myanmar Chinlone Federation to see the sport continue at the Southeast Asian Games that they are also providing coaches Maung Maung Myo and Tin Win Naing to help their opposition improve.

"We want to encourage our neighbours to continue to play the sport," added the official.

Starting May 1, for 20 days, the eight Thai players and their support staff will work with the coaches to

adapt to the new rules that were laid out for the competition on March 28.

For the 2013 competition, rules were created for a competitive version of this traditionally non-competitive sport.

In these games, six players were to pass the ball between each other as they walk around in a circle, with one player moving to the centre and being supported by their teammates to create a string of moves.

But Zaw Maung Maung Myint says the Myanmar players were so skilled that they chose not to stand in a support circle but to gather and enter from one position.

"This meant all the players were gathering in one place and neglecting the traditional playing circle. Hence rules have been amended to address this," said Zaw Maung Maung Myint.

The new rules introduced mean that players now have a set position that they will return to within the circle and will return to that fixed position once they have played in the middle.

Thailand are not the only ones to benefit from the sporting diplomacy of Myanmar. Chinlone teams from Cambodia and Malaysia have already undertaken training in Nay Pyi Taw.

ATHLETICS

Bolt left behind at World Relays

A US team led by Justin Gatlin rained on Usain Bolt's parade in the 4x100m at the World Relays on May 2 as the US team wrapped up three of the four titles on offer, one in world record time.

Bolt was one of the big names to have missed the inaugural edition of the IAAF's gamble at an innovative track event, but his bid to add to his accolades in front of a raucous crowd in the capital of the Bahamas fell 2 metres short.

Snatching the baton from teammate Nickel Ashmeade, Bolt powered down the home stretch of the Thomas A Robinson stadium, but was unable to catch Ryan Bailey and add to his three world and two Olympic relay golds.

Instead, Bailey led the US quartet also comprising Mike Rodgers, Gatlin and Tyson Gay - all of whom have served doping bans ranging from nine months to four years - home in 37.38 seconds, with Jamaica finishing 0.30sec behind and Japan claiming bronze.

Rapturous applause welcomed Bolt, who acquired his "Lightning Bolt" nickname when setting three records at under-17 level at the CARIFTA Games in the Bahamas in 2002, to the blue track.

The inevitable lingering television close-ups relayed to the big screen showed him preening his hair, waving and returning the applause.

But it was not to be on a warm, windy night with Gatlin's second-leg sprint setting up a comprehensive US win.

In other finals, the US men's team claimed the 4x800m in 7:04.84sec, Robby Andrews holding off Kenyan

Jeremiah Mutai on the final two laps.

"My teammates put me in a great position and I hope I didn't make them too nervous out there" Andrews said after his race played out to the beat of a military brass band synching with some high-stepping, day-glo carnival dancers.

Kenya initially placed second, but were later disqualified for "changing team composition and running order", Poland upgraded to silver, with Australia claiming bronze in a race in which only five nations competed.

Replacing last year's 4x1500m relay, the women's distance medley, featuring four runners competing over 1200m, 400m, 800m and 1600m - 10 laps making up 4km - was won by the United States.

Treniere Moser, four-time Olympic and five-time world gold medallist Sanya Richards-Ross, Ajee Wilson and Shannon Rowbury combined to clock 10:36.50, now recognised by the IAAF as the new world record in the rarely run event.

But a US women's team featuring the most successful woman in relay history in Allyson Felix were trumped by Nigeria in the 4x200m.

Jeneba Tarmoh's handover to Felix went awry and Christy Udoh steamed past as the Nigerians timed 1:30.52 for gold ahead of Jamaica and Germany.

The Bahamas will also host the third edition of the IAAF World Relays in 2017 as track and field officials hailed the high-octane, two-day event as an overwhelming innovative success.

Lamine Diack, president of the International Association of Athletics Federations, confirmed May 1 that the World Relays would switch to a biennial event, but with open bidding for



The US women's distance relay team pose after setting a new world record. Photo: AFP

potential hosts after 2017.

"Last year was a wonderful, successful event, a colourful festival of athletics which was topped by three world records," Diack said, adding that the presence of Jamaican sprint star Usain Bolt was a coup for the event.

"Success is a powerful magnet and we are therefore delighted that the world's fastest man, Usain Bolt, will be competing here."

Diack added, "The creation of the IAAF world relays is the latest example of athletics' continuing evolution and the IAAF is especially pleased that this exciting new competition has found a natural home in the Bahamas, a nation with a rich and suc-

cessful history in the relays.

"So we are therefore delighted that the Bahamas will also be the host of the next edition which will take place in two years' time in 2017."

The 2014 edition of the World Relays certainly caught the imagination of the local population, a sell-out stadium revelling in two evening sessions of top-class track entertainment.

This year, Bolt headlines more than 600 athletes from 40 countries racing for a total prize purse of \$1.4 million, with more on offer for world records.

Bolt, who has anchored Jamaica to two Olympic titles and three world golds in the 4x100m relay, gave his vote of confidence to the World Re-

lays, saying it was a time for teammates to bond in a quintessentially individual sport.

"It's always fun. I really enjoy them," the six-time Olympic gold medallist said.

"I always look forward to the end of the championships and the relays. And now I can actually come and race just relays. It's just wonderful for me."

American Allyson Felix, the most successful woman in track relay history with five world and three Olympic golds, reiterated Bolt's words.

"Relays are so much fun because track is an individual sport and we spend so much time focusing on ourselves," she said. - AFP